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# Artists on Art

## Frankenstein's Fallen Angel

Joyce Carol Oates

"Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all human kind sinned against me?"

—FRANKENSTEIN'S DEMON

Quite apart from its enduring celebrity, and its proliferation in numberless extraliterary forms, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* is a remarkable work. A novel *sui generis*, if a novel at all, it is a unique blending of Gothic, fabulist, allegorical, and philosophical materials. Though certainly one of the most calculated and *willed* of fantasies, being in large part a kind of gloss upon or rejoinder to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *Frankenstein* is fueled by the kind of grotesque, faintly absurd, and wildly inventive images that spring direct from the unconscious: the eight-foot creature designed to be "beautiful," who turns out almost indescribably repulsive (yellow-skinned, shriveled of countenance, with straight black lips and near-colorless eyes); the cherished cousin-bride who *is* beautiful but, in the mind's dreaming, yields horrors ("As I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds"); the mad dream of the Arctic as a country of "eternal light" that will prove, of course, only a place of endless ice, the appropriate landscape for Victor Frankenstein's death and his demon's self-immolation.

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Central to *Frankenstein*—as it is central to a vastly different nineteenth-century romance, *Jane Eyre*—is a stroke of lightning that appears to issue in a dazzling “stream of fire” from a beautiful old oak tree (“So soon the light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump”): the literal stimulus for Frankenstein’s subsequent discovery of the cause of generation and life. And according to Mary Shelley’s prefatory account of the origin of her “ghost story,” the very image of Frankenstein and his demon-creature sprang from a waking dream of extraordinary vividness:

I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bound of reverie. I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion. . . . The student sleeps: but he is awakened; he opens his eyes: behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.

Hallucinatory and surrealist on its deepest level, *Frankenstein* is of course one of the most self-consciously literary “novels” ever written: its awkward form is the epistolary Gothic; its lyric descriptions of natural scenes (the grandiose Valley of Chamounix in particular) spring from Romantic sources; its speeches and monologues echo both Shakespeare and Milton; and, should the author’s didactic intention not be clear enough, the demon-creature educates himself by studying three books of symbolic significance—Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*, Plutarch’s *Lives*, and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. (The last conveniently supplies him with a sense of his own predicament, as Mary Shelley hopes to dramatize it. He reads Milton’s great epic as if it were a “true history” giving the picture of an omnipotent God warring with His creatures; he identifies himself with Adam, except so far as Adam had come forth from God a “perfect creature, happy and prosperous.” Finally, of course, he identifies with Satan: “I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent

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**Joyce Carol Oates’** new novel, the third in a quartet of experimental “genre” novels, is *Mysteries of Winterthurn*. Her most recent collection of critical essays, *The Profane Art*, includes an essay on Emily Brontë originally published in *Critical Inquiry* (December 1982). She teaches at Princeton University.

and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.”)

The search of medieval alchemists for the legendary philosophers' stone (the talismanic process by which base metals might be transformed into gold or, in psychological terms, the means by which the individual might realize his destiny), Faust's reckless defiance of human limitations and his willingness to barter his soul for knowledge, the fatal search of such tragic figures as Oedipus and Hamlet for answers to the mysteries of their lives—these are the archetypal dramas to which *Frankenstein* bears an obvious kinship. Yet, as one reads, as Frankenstein and his despised shadow-self engage in one after another of the novel's many dialogues, it begins to seem as if the nineteen-year-old author is discovering these archetypal elements for the first time. Frankenstein “is” a demonic parody (or extension) of Milton's God; he “is” *Prometheus plasticator*, the creator of mankind; but at the same time, by his own account, he is totally unable to control the behavior of his demon (variously called “monster,” “fiend,” “wretch,” but necessarily lacking a name). Surprisingly, it is not by way of the priggish and “self-devoted” young scientist that Mary Shelley discovers the great power of her narrative but by way of the misshapen demon, with whom most readers identify: “My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?” It is not simply the case that the demon—like Satan and Adam in *Paradise Lost*—has the most compelling speeches in the novel and is far wiser and more magnanimous than his creator: he is also the means by which a transcendent love—a romantically *unrequited love*—is expressed. Surely one of the secrets of *Frankenstein*, which helps to account for its abiding appeal, is the demon's patient, unquestioning, utterly faithful, and utterly *human* love for his irresponsible creator.

When Frankenstein is tracking the demon into the Arctic regions, for instance, it is clearly the demon who is helping him in his search, and even leaving food for him; but Frankenstein is so blind—in fact so comically blind—he believes that “spirits” are responsible. “Yet still a spirit of good followed and directed my steps, and, when I most murmured, would suddenly extricate me from seemingly insurmountable difficulties. Sometimes, when nature, overcome by hunger, sunk under the exhaustion, a repast was prepared for me in the desert, that restored and inspired me. . . . I may not doubt that it was set there by the spirits that I had invoked to aid me.”

By degrees, with the progression of the fable's unlikely plot, the inhuman creation becomes increasingly human while his creator becomes increasingly inhuman, frozen in a posture of rigorous denial. (*He* is blameless of any wrongdoing in terms of the demon and even dares to tell Walton, literally with his dying breath, that another scientist might succeed where he had failed!—the lesson of the “Frankenstein monster”

is revealed as totally lost on Frankenstein himself.) The demon is (sub)human consciousness-in-the-making, naturally benevolent as Milton's Satan is not, and received with horror and contempt solely because of his physical appearance. He is sired without a mother in defiance of nature, but he is in one sense an infant—a comically monstrous eight-foot baby—whose progenitor rejects him immediately after creating him, in one of the most curious (and dreamlike) scenes in the novel:

“How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom, with such infinite pains and care, I had endeavored to form? . . . I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bed-chamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep.”

Here follows the nightmare vision of Frankenstein's bride-to-be, Elizabeth, as a form of his dead mother, with “grave-worms crawling” in her shroud; and shortly afterward the “wretch” himself appears at Frankenstein's bed, drawing away the canopy as Mary Shelley had imagined. But Frankenstein is so cowardly he runs away again; and this time the demon is indeed abandoned, to reappear only after the first of the “murders” of Frankenstein's kin. On the surface, Frankenstein's behavior is preposterous, even idiotic, for he seems blind to the fact that is apparent to any reader—that he has loosed a fearful power into the world, whether it strikes his eye as aesthetically pleasing or not, and he *must* take responsibility for it. Except, of course, he does not. For, as he keeps telling himself, he is blameless of any wrongdoing apart from the act of creation itself. The emotions he catalogs for us—gloom, sorrow, misery, despair—are conventionally Romantic attitudes, mere luxuries in a context that requires *action* and not simply *response*.

By contrast the demon is all activity, all yearning, all hope. His love for his maker is unrequited and seems incapable of making any impression upon Frankenstein; yet the demon never gives it up, even when he sounds most threatening: “Beware,” says the demon midway in the novel, “for I am fearless, and therefore powerful. I will watch with the wiliness of a snake, that I may sting with its venom. Man, you shall repent of the injuries you inflict.” His voice is very like his creator's—indeed, everyone in *Frankenstein* sounds alike—but his posture is always one of simple need: he requires love in order to become less monstrous, but, as he is a monster, love is denied him; and the man responsible for this comically tragic state of affairs says repeatedly that he is not to blame. Frankenstein's typical response to the situation is: “I felt as if I had committed some

great crime, the consciousness of which haunted me. I was guiltless, but I had indeed drawn a horrible curse upon my head, as mortal as that of crime." But if Frankenstein is not to blame for the various deaths that occur, who is? Had he endowed his creation, as God endowed Adam in Milton's epic, with free will? Or is the demon psychologically his creature, committing the forbidden acts Frankenstein wants committed?—so long as Frankenstein himself remains "guiltless."

It is a measure of the subtlety of this moral parable that the demon strikes so many archetypal chords and suggests so many variant readings. He recapitulates in truncated form the history of consciousness of his race (learning to speak, read, write, etc., by closely watching the De Lacey family); he is an abandoned child, a parentless orphan; he takes on the voices of Adam, Satan ("Evil thenceforth became my good," he says, as Milton's fallen angel says, "Evil be thou my good"), even our "first mother," Eve. When the demon terrifies himself by seeing his reflection in a pool, and grasping at once the nature of his own deformity, he is surely not mirroring Narcissus, as some commentators have suggested, but Milton's Eve in her surprised discovery of her own beauty, in book 4 of *Paradise Lost*:

I thither went  
 With unexperienc't thought, and laid me down  
 On the green bank, to look into the clear  
 Smooth Lake, that to me seem'd another Sky.  
 As I bent down to look, just opposite,  
 A Shape within the wat'ry gleam appear'd  
 Bending to look on me, I started back,  
 It started back, but pleas'd I soon return'd,  
 Pleas'd it return'd as soon with answering looks  
 Of sympathy and love; there I had fixt  
 Mine eyes till now, and pin'd with vain desire  
[ll. 456–66]<sup>1</sup>

He is Shakespeare's Edmund, though *unloved*—a shadow figure more tragic, because more "conscious," than the hero he represents. Most suggestively, he has become by the novel's melodramatic conclusion a form of Christ: sinned against by all humankind, yet fundamentally blameless, and *yet* quite willing to die as a sacrifice. He speaks of his death as a "consummation"; he is going to burn himself on a funeral pyre somewhere in the Arctic wastes—unlikely, certainly, but a fitting end to a life conceived by way of lightning and electricity:

"But soon," he cried with sad and solemn enthusiasm, "I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the

winds. My spirit will sleep in peace; or, if it thinks, it will not surely think thus."

But the demon does not die within the confines of the novel, so perhaps he has not died after all. He is, in the end, a "modern" species of shadow or *Doppelgänger*—*the nightmare that is deliberately created by man's ingenuity* and not a mere supernatural being or fairy-tale remnant.

\* \* \*

*Frankenstein's* double significance as a work of prose fiction and a cultural myth—as "novel" of 1818 and timeless "metaphor"—makes it a highly difficult story to read directly. A number of popular misconceptions obscure it for most readers: Frankenstein is of course *not* the monster, but his creator; nor is he a mad scientist of genius—he is in fact a highly idealistic and naive youth in the conventional Romantic mode (in Walton's admiring eyes, "noble," "cultivated," a "celestial spirit" who has suffered "great and unparalleled misfortunes"), not unlike Mary Shelley's fated lover Shelley. Despite the fact that a number of catastrophes occur around him and indirectly because of him, Victor Frankenstein is well intentioned, gentlemanly, *good*. He is no sadist like H. G. Wells' exiled vivisectionist Dr. Moreau, who boasts: "You cannot imagine the strange colorless delight of these intellectual desires. The thing before you is no longer an animal, a fellow-creature, but a problem."<sup>2</sup> Frankenstein's mission, on the other hand, is selfless, even messianic:

"No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success. Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. . . . If I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in the process of time . . . renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption."

It is a measure of the novel's extraordinary fame that the very name "Frankenstein" has long since supplanted "Prometheus" in popular usage; and the Frankenstein legend retains a significance for our time as the Prometheus legend does not.

How many fictional characters, after all, have made the great leap from literature to mythology? How many creations of sheer language have stepped from the rhythms of their authors' idiosyncratic voices into what might be called a collective cultural consciousness? Don Quixote, Dracula, Sherlock Holmes, Alice (in Wonderland), certain figures in the

fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen . . . and of course Frankenstein's "monster." Virtually millions of people who have never heard of the novel *Frankenstein*, let alone that a young Englishwoman named Mary Shelley (in fact Godwin) wrote it at the age of nineteen, are well acquainted with the image of Frankenstein popularized by Boris Karloff in the 1930s and understand, at least intuitively, the ethical implications of the metaphor. (As in the expression, particularly relevant for our time, "We have created a Frankenstein monster.") The more potent the archetype evoked by a work of literature, the more readily its specific form slips free of the time-bound *personal* work. On the level of cultural myth, the figures of Dracula, Sherlock Holmes, Alice, and the rest are near-autonomous beings, linked to no specific books and no specific authors. They have become communal creations; they belong to us all. Hence the very real difficulty in reading Mary Shelley's novel for the first time. (Subsequent readings are far easier and yield greater rewards.)

Precisely because of this extraordinary fame, one should be reminded of how original and unique the novel was at the time of its publication. Can it even be read at the present time in a context hospitable to its specific allusions and assumptions—one conversant with the thorny glories of *Paradise Lost*, the sentimental ironies of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the Gothic conventions of tales-within-tales, epistolary frames, and histrionic speeches delivered at length? In a more accomplished work, *Wuthering Heights*, the structural complexities of tales-within-tales are employed for artistic ends: the ostensible fracturing of time yields a rich poetic significance; characters grow and change like people whom we have come to know. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* the strained conventions of the romance are mere structural devices to allow Victor Frankenstein and his demon their opposing—but intimately linked—"voices." Thus, abrupt transitions in space and time take place in a kind of rhetorical vacuum: all is summary, past history, *exemplum*.

But it is a mistake to read *Frankenstein* as a modern novel of psychological realism, or as a "novel" at all. It contains no characters, only points of view; its concerns are pointedly moral and didactic; it makes no claims for verisimilitude of even a poetic Wordsworthian nature. (The Alpine landscapes are all self-consciously sublime and theatrical; Mont Blanc, for instance, suggests "another earth, the habitations of another race of beings.") If one were pressed to choose a literary antecedent for *Frankenstein*, it might be, surprisingly, Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, rather than a popular Gothic work like Mrs. Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*, which allegedly had the power to frighten its readers. (A character in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* says of this once famous novel: "I remember finishing it in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time.") Though *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* are commonly linked, Bram Stoker's tour de force of 1897 is vastly different in tone, theme, and intention from Mary Shelley's novel: its "monster" is not at all monstrous in ap-



pearance, only in behavior; and he is thoroughly and irremediably evil by nature. But no one in *Frankenstein* is evil—the universe is emptied of God and of theistic assumptions of “good” and “evil.” Hence, its modernity.

Tragedy does not arise spontaneous and unwilling in so “modern” a setting; it must be made—in fact, manufactured. The Fates are not to blame; there *are* no Fates, only the brash young scientist who boasts of never having feared the supernatural. (“In my education my father had taken the greatest precautions that my mind should be impressed with no supernatural horrors. I do not ever remember to have trembled at a tale of superstition, or to have feared the apparition of a spirit. . . . A churchyard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which, from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for the worm.”) Where *Dracula* and other conventional Gothic works are fantasies, with clear links to fairy tales and legends, and even popular ballads, *Frankenstein* has the theoretical and cautionary tone of science fiction. It is meant to prophesy, not to entertain.

Another aspect of *Frankenstein's* uniqueness lies in the curious bond between Frankenstein and his created demon. Where, by tradition, such beings as doubles, shadow-selves, “imps of the perverse,” and classic *Doppelgängers* (like poor Golyadkin's nemesis in Dostoevsky's *Double* [1846]) spring full grown from supernatural origins—that is, from unacknowledged recesses of the human spirit—Frankenstein's demon is *natural* in origin: a manufactured nemesis. He is an abstract idea made flesh, a Platonic essence given a horrific (and certainly ludicrous) existence. Yet though he is meant to be Frankenstein's ideal, a man-made miracle that would “pour a torrent of light into our dark world,” he is only a fragment of that ideal—which is to say, a mockery, a parody, a joke. The monsters we create by way of an advanced technological civilization “are” ourselves as we cannot hope to see ourselves—incomplete, blind, blighted, and, most of all, self-destructive. For it is the forbidden wish for death that dominates. (In intention it is customarily the deaths of others, “enemies”; in fact it may be our own deaths we plan.) Hence the tradition of recognizing Faustian pacts with the devil as acts of aggression against the human self—the very “I” of the rational being.

Since Frankenstein's creature is made up of parts collected from charnel houses and graves and his creator acknowledges that he “disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame,” it is inevitable that the creature be a *profane* thing. He cannot be blessed or loved: he springs not from a natural union but has been forged in what Frankenstein calls a “workshop of filthy creation.” One of the brilliant surrealist touches of the narrative is that Frankenstein's shadow-self is a giant; even the rationalization for this curious decision is ingenious. “As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed,”

Frankenstein explains to Walton, "I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature; that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionably large." A demon of mere human size would not have been nearly so compelling.<sup>3</sup>

(The reader should keep in mind that, in 1818, the notion that "life" might be galvanized in laboratory conditions was really not so farfetched, for the properties of electricity were not commonly understood and seem to have been bound up magically with what might be called metaphorically the "spark" of life.<sup>4</sup> Again, in 1984, the possibility of artificially induced life, human or otherwise, does not seem especially remote.)

Because in one sense the demon *is* Frankenstein's deepest self, the relationship between them is dreamlike, fraught with undefined emotion. Throughout the novel Frankenstein is susceptible to fainting fits, bouts of illness and exhaustion, and nightmares of romantic intensity—less a fully realized personality than a queer stunted half-self (rather like Roderick Usher, whose sister Madeleine, *his* secret self, is buried alive). It is significant that as soon as Frankenstein induces life in his eight-foot monster, he notices *for the first time* what he has created. "His limbs were in proportion," Frankenstein testifies, "and I had selected his features as beautiful." But something has clearly gone wrong:

"Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same color as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips."

Significant too is the fact that Frankenstein retreats from this vision and falls asleep—an unlikely response in naturalistic terms but quite appropriate symbolically—so that, shortly afterward, his demon can arouse *him* from sleep:

"I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window-shutters, I beheld the wretch, the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks."

"Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as Dante could not have conceived."

Frankenstein's superficial response to the "thing" he has created is solely in aesthetic terms, for his atheistic morality precludes all thoughts of transgression. (Considering that the author of *Frankenstein* is a woman, a woman well acquainted with pregnancy and childbirth at a precocious age, it is curious that nowhere in the novel does anyone raise the issue of the demon's "unnatural" genesis: he is a monster-son born of Man exclusively, a parody of the Word or the Idea made Flesh.) Ethically, Frankenstein is "blameless"—though he is haunted by the suspicion throughout that he has committed a crime of some sort, with the very best of intentions.

Where the realistic novel presents characters in a more or less coherent "field," as part of a defined society, firmly established in time and place, romance does away with questions of verisimilitude and plausibility altogether and deals directly with the elements of narrative: it might be said to be an "easier" form psychologically, since it evokes archetypal responses on its primary level. No one expects Victor Frankenstein to behave plausibly when he is a near-allegorical figure; no one expects his demon to behave plausibly since he *is* a demonic presence, an outsized mirror image of his creator. When the demon warns Frankenstein (in traditional Gothic form, incidentally), "*I shall be with you on your wedding-night,*" it seems only natural, granted Frankenstein's egocentricity, that he worry about his own safety and not his bride's and that, despite the warning, Frankenstein allows Elizabeth to be murdered. His wish is his demon-self's command, though he never acknowledges his complicity. Indeed, *Frankenstein* begins to read as an antiromance, a merciless critique of Romantic attitudes—sorrow, misery, self-loathing, despair, paralysis, etc.—written, as it were, from the inside, by a young woman who had already lost a baby in infancy (in 1815, a girl), would lose another, also a girl, in 1817, and, in 1819, lost a third—named, oddly, William (the very name of the little boy murdered early in the narrative by Frankenstein's demon).<sup>5</sup> Regardless of the sufferings of others, the romantically "self-devoted" hero responds solely in terms of his own emotions. He might be a lyric poet of the early 1800s, for all his preoccupation with self: everything refers tragically to him; everything is rendered in terms of *his* experience:

Great God! Why did I not then expire? Why am I here to relate the destruction of the best hope, and the purest creature of earth? [Elizabeth] was there, lifeless and inanimate, thrown across the bed, her head hanging down, and her pale and distorted features half covered by her hair. Everywhere I turn I see the same figure,—her bloodless arms and relaxed form flung by the murderer on its bridal bier. Could I behold this, and live? (Alas, life is obstinate, and clings closest where it is most hated.) For a moment only, and I lost recollection: I fainted.

Frankenstein grapples with the complex moral issues raised by his demonic creation by “fainting” in one way or another throughout the novel. And in his abrogation of consciousness and responsibility, the demon naturally acts: for this *is* the Word, the secret wish for destruction, made Flesh.

The cruelest act of all is performed by Frankenstein before the very eyes of his demon: this is the sudden destruction of the partly assembled “bride.” He makes the creature at the bidding of his demon, who has promised, most convincingly, to leave Europe with her and to live “virtuously”; but, suddenly repulsed by the “filthy process” he has undertaken, Frankenstein destroys his work. (“The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended for happiness, and with a howl of devilish despair and revenge, withdrew.”) Afterward he thinks, looking at the remains of the half-finished creature, that he has *almost* mangled the living flesh of a human being; but he never feels any remorse for what he has done and never considers that, in “mangling” the flesh of his demon’s bride, he is murdering the pious and rather too perfect Elizabeth, the cousin-bride whom he professes to love. “Am I to be thought the only criminal,” the demon asks, “when all human kind sinned against me?” He might have said as reasonably, *when all humankind conspired in my sin.*

While *Paradise Lost* is to Frankenstein’s demon (and very likely to Mary Shelley as well) the picture of an “omnipotent God warring with his creatures,” *Frankenstein* is the picture of a finite and flawed god at war with, and eventually overcome by, his creation. It is a parable for our time, an enduring prophecy, a remarkably acute diagnosis of the lethal nature of *denial*: denial of responsibility for one’s actions, denial of the shadow-self locked within consciousness. Even in the debased and sensational form in which Frankenstein’s monster is known by most persons—as a kind of retarded giant, one might say, with electrodes in his neck—his archetypal significance rings true. “My form,” he says eloquently, “is a filthy type of yours.”

1. The influence of John Milton on *Frankenstein* is so general as to figure on nearly every page; and certainly the very conception of the monumental *Paradise Lost* stands behind the conception of Mary Shelley’s “ghost story.” According to Christopher Small’s excellent *Ariel Like a Harpy: Shelley, Mary, and Frankenstein* (London, 1972), Mary Shelley’s book list notes *Paradise Regained* as read in 1815, and in 1816 she and Shelley were both reading *Paradise Lost* at intervals during the year. At one point Shelley read the long poem aloud to her, finishing it in a week in November of 1816.

2. H. G. Wells’ *Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) is a savage variant on the Frankenstein legend. Moreau experiments on living animals, trying to make them “human” or humanoid; he succeeds in creating a race of Beast Folk who eventually rise up against him and kill him. Moreau’s beliefs strike a more chilling—and more contemporary—note than Frank-

enstein's idealism: "To this day I have never troubled about the ethics of the matter. The study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature," boasts Moreau.

3. In Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), the undersized and mysteriously deformed Hyde, Jekyll's deliberately willed alter ego, is sheer pitiless appetite, devoid of any of Frankenstein's demon's appealing qualities. He is ugly, stunted, hateful in appearance—but deliberately hateful, for, much more obviously than Frankenstein's well-spoken nemesis, he represents his creator's violent reaction against the restraints of civilization. Stevenson's novella is fascinating for many reasons, one of them being Jekyll's remarkable voice when he confesses his relationship with Hyde and the gradual usurpation of his soul by Hyde's spirit:

The powers of Hyde seemed to have grown with the sickliness of Jekyll. And certainly the hate that divided them was equal on each side. With Jekyll, it was a thing of vital instinct. He had now seen the full deformity of that creature that shared with him some of the phenomena of consciousness, and was co-heir with him to death: and beyond these links of community, which in themselves made the most poignant part of his distress, he thought of Hyde, for all his energy of life, as of something not only hellish but inorganic. This was the shocking thing; that the slime of the pit seemed to utter cries and voices; that the amorphous dust gesticulated and sinned; that what was dead, and had no shape, should usurp the offices of life. And this again, that that insurgent horror was knit to him closer than a wife, closer than an eye; lay caged in his flesh, where he heard it mutter and felt it struggle to be born.

4. In Thomas Hogg's *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1858), Shelley's lifelong fascination with lightning, electricity, and galvanism is discussed at some length. As a boy he owned something called an "electrical machine" with which he amused himself with experiments; as a young man he was mesmerized by lightning and thunder and made it a point to "enjoy" electrical storms.

5. The feminist critic Ellen Moers interprets *Frankenstein* solely in terms of a birth myth "that was lodged in the novelist's imagination . . . by the fact that she was herself a mother" ("Female Gothic," *Literary Women* [Garden City, N.Y., 1977], p. 140). Though her argument certainly aids in understanding some of the less evident motives for the composition of *Frankenstein*, it reduces a complex philosophical narrative to little more than a semiconscious fantasy, scarcely a literary work at all. Did Mary Shelley's womb, or her brain, write *Frankenstein*? In virtually a parody of feminist mythmaking, Moers argues that Mary Shelley's book is "most powerful" where it is "most feminine": "in the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences" (p. 142).