The Limits of Discourse and the Ideology of Form in Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein"
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F EW other books in the Gothic mode have provided such varied interpretations as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.[1] Scholars have produced different readings of the novel in general and the function of the Creature in particular by concentrating on discrete parts of the novel. A short list might include: the Creature as representative of the terror of the working class or the oppressed or as a figure for the incomprehensibility of the proletariat; the Creature as the failure of the feminine domestic sphere or the otherness of family; the novel's representation of the anxieties of maternal creation and of the anxieties of scientific discourse that may usurp feminine creation.[2] With these valuable critiques, why add another interpretation?

My reading of *Frankenstein* is embedded in the novel's critical dis-

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1. See Fred Botting, "*Frankenstein* and the Language of Monstrosity," in *Reviewing Romanticism*, ed. Philip W. Martin and Robin Jarvis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 1–30 on the critical reception of *Frankenstein*'s "indeterminacy." See also Ellen Cronan Rose, "Custody Battles: Reproducing Knowledge about *Frankenstein*," *New Literary History* 26.4 (1995), 809–32.

2. For examples, see Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken For Wonders* (New York: Verso, 1983); Clara Tuite, "Frankenstein's Creature and Malthus's 'Jaundiced Eye': Population, Body Politics, and the Monstrous Sublime," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22.1 (1998), 141–55; Anca Vlasopolos, "Frankenstein's Hidden Skeleton: The Psycho-Politics of Oppression" in *Science Fiction Studies* 10 (1983), 124–35; Warren Montag, "The 'Workshop of Filthy Creation': A Marxist Reading of *Frankenstein*," in *Frankenstein: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Johanna M. Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 382–95; Johanna M. Smith, "'Cooped Up' with 'Sad Trash': Domesticity and the Sciences in *Frankenstein*," in Smith, ed., pp. 313–33; Jean Hall, "*Frankenstein*: The Horrifying Otherness of Family," *Essays in Literature* 17 (1990), 179–89; Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Barbara Johnson, "My Creature/Myself" *Diacritics* 12.2 (1982), 2–10; Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Words of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Alan Bewell, "An Issue of Monstrous Desire: *Frankenstein* and Obstetrics," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2.1 (1988), 105–28.

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cussion. In recent years, this fertile discussion has uncovered the novel's complex historical and ideological content, demystifying and denaturalizing it. However, it is only by reading *Frankenstein* as a formal presentation of its content that we can understand the Romantic ideology constructed in the form of the novel. Moving the discussion from content to form opens up a dialectical analysis and offers a space from which to read the novel differently.[3] While the novel's content invites readers to focus on various and historically-specific discourses, its form produces an important, if overlooked, ideology—the ideology of literary transcendence—which is commensurate with the literary and historical project of Romanticism.[4] Rather than taking the content as a historical critique of Romantic culture, interpretation of form can lead us to understand how this novel helped historically to produce the quintessential Romantic notion of transcendence that negates its historical moment, yet which, paradoxically, produces its own historicity. It is this duality, the discursive critique and its negation by the novel's formal production of the ideology of transcendence, that propels the continued interest in Mary Shelley's novel.

As many critics have suggested, the interweaving narratives in *Frankenstein* are emblematic of contestatory discourses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—for instance, Romance and domestic fiction, Enlightenment and scientific discourses, Gothic fiction and the sublime.[5] However, within the structure of the novel, each of these discourses is inadequate to produce and sustain a coherent narrative, and thus each discourse fails to produce an adequate ideology of romance and domesticity, of science or of aesthetics. Instead, each discourse is distanciated and exposed *as* an ideology,

3. Slavoj Žižek has suggested that the "appearance of monstrous content" of horror texts is a "kind of fantasy screen where the multiplicity of meanings can appear and fight for hegemony." Form is thus a way to view the ideological operations that enable those meanings to emerge from the texts. See Žižek, "Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears," *October* 58 (1991), 63.

4. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge's classic formulation of what we have come to call the Romantic power of the imagination, or the ideology of transcendence that can reconcile the universal and the particular, in *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), I, 17.

5. I omit discussion of the novel's engagement with discourses on medicine, race, education, and colonialism, in order to develop my analysis of these three examples (domestic, scientific, aesthetic). Fred Botting, in "Language," pp. 36–49, usefully comments on the contradictions of trying to supply a "unifying motive."

exposing its social limitations.[6] This is one aspect of the text recent critics have examined. However, if we look to the source of the Creature's terror and his "otherness," we find not a clearly determined representation (the working class, the hideous progeny, the ugly or "unrepresentable"); instead, we find the terror that exists at the limits of discourse to contain what is unthinkable. The Creature's "otherness" stems from the inability of these various discourses to give meaning to the bourgeois man (symbolized as Victor Frankenstein and his double, the Creature) because of their internal contradictions. As Fred Botting suggests, "Frankenstein's subject position is constituted by a *desire* for transcendence, for an imaginary totality that encounters its lack when confronted by the otherness of the monster."[7] The "otherness" of the Creature can be described as the Lacanian Other of the Symbolic Order which serves to position desire in terms of absence: that is, desire for meaning is produced from the absence of meaning created by the contradictions of discourse. That desire for meaning begs for "transcendence" and "totality," but is constituted by this lack.

It is this absence of meaning, the limits of particular discourses, that is confronted by the form of the Gothic novel, or to put it in Fredric Jameson's terms, by a "strategy of containment" of the unthinkable.[8] Looking at the content misses the importance of looking at the way the novel's form places what is heterogeneous at a distance and produces a desire for meaning that these different discourses promise but do not fulfill. The content distanciated by its form produces a desire for a transcendence that subsumes all the historical implications of the text, making the work consumable as an aesthetic object, though not necessarily as a completely "pleasurable" one. While the content of

6. "Distanciated" has a long critical history. I am using it as it relates to form and ideology. As Michael Sprinker explains, "The mode of presentation in art is perceptual or phenomenal; in it we see and feel the lived experience of ideology. Ideology thus appears in aesthetic presentation, but at a distance. The presentation of ideology in art places the reader or spectator, for the moment and within the context of the work's ideological materials, outside the particular ideology or ideologies being presented." See Sprinker, *Imaginary Relations: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 1987), p. 282.

7. Botting, "Language," p. 15, emphasis mine.

8. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). p. 53.

Mary Shelley's novel may produce a critique of domesticity, science, and beauty, it also produces an ideology inherent in the form of the novel: that literature has the capability to "transcend" the historical and the specific. Therefore, the novel *Frankenstein* produces an ideology in its final formal function that makes it seem transcendent amid its historical discursive critiques. The form of Mary Shelley's novel operates as a force that transcends the antagonistic struggle for meaning, enabling various reproductions of the work and producing a desire for explicable meaning. Transcendence in this sense is historically produced and contingent on historical discourses as well as on literary criticism.[9] However, it is precisely the novel's form that prevents this stable understanding. The terror of incoherence is transcended by a reading practice that is prescribed by the form of the novel.[10] The novel's form contains it own inability to "speak," enabling the pleasure of reading *Frankenstein* to repress its "unthinkable" discursive limits.

<div align="center">I</div>

Frankenstein depends upon three prominent, though not all-inclusive, discourses: the fiction of domesticity and sentimentalism; the discourse of science and discovery; and moral philosophy, including the sublime. Much scholarship emphasizes one discourse in order to create a sustainable interpretation of the novel as a whole; occasionally, scholarship reveals an aporia between two dominant discourses, such as science and domesticity, in which the separate spheres of men and women collide. These readings are compelling and necessary.[11] If we

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9. Lawrence Lipking characterizes the novel as a critical "free-for-all," concluding that it resists any "simple" (read theoretical) explanation because there are no "moral absolutes" and we, just like the novel, are filled with moral ambiguities. See Lipking, "*Frankenstein*, the True Story; or, Rousseau Judges Jean-Jacques," in *Frankenstein*, ed. J. Paul Hunter (New York: Norton, 1996), pp. 319–20.

10. I will forego discussing the text's material production (the triple-decker format, the changes in prefatory material) because such emphasis erroneously assumes that the novel's "materiality" only exists in its material construction, and not in the very form of its material production as a literary text. Regarding the 1818 and 1831 texts, I defer to Mary Poovey, Anne Mellor and others in my attempt to dislodge the narrative of revision as a developmental tale of the text, or of the author's creative genius or of her politics.

11. For example, Bewell, "Monstrous Desire," pp. 105–28; Botting, "Language," pp. 51–59; Maurice Hindle, "'Vital Matters': Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Romantic Science," *Critical Survey* 2.1 (1990), 29–35; Mellor, *Mary Shelley* (chapter five, in particular).

look, however, to the ways in which criticism has examined the ideologies inherent in each of these discourses within the interweaving narratives, allowing their contradictions to reveal themselves, we can see how these contradictions lead each particular discourse to fail and lead critics to conclude that the novel is an ideological critique.[12] It is this internal failure of ideology in the content of the novel that critics have analyzed so well. My analysis of particular readings will demonstrate that the novel does work to distanciate particular ideologies in the particular discourses of the domestic, the scientific, and the sublime; however, critiquing ideological content is only one part of how this novel works, though an important part. I will then trace how the form of this novel produces an ideology of transcendence that supercedes the content. By distancing the ideological content, the form produces this primary Romantic ideology that enables multiple and contradictory meanings of the novel.

Much of the critical revival of *Frankenstein* is due to feminist scholarship, which has interpreted the novel as a social critique of the domestic sphere, patriarchal relations, gender formation and feminine creativity. Read as a critique of gender relations, the novel's domestic relations take center stage as the structural elements that make the novel compelling. What undoes these domestic relationships is the "terror" of feminine affections, construed as sexuality, emotional blackmail, or familial responsibility. This domestic ideology has been traced within the romance plot of Elizabeth and Victor's courtship, the sentimental plot of the elder Frankenstein's benevolence toward Caroline Beaufort, the Frankensteins' benevolence toward Elizabeth and Justine, and the De Laceys' domestic narrative of cooperation amid personal tragedies. Together these discourses create a focus on the familial. Kate Ellis's critique of the novel, for example, understands the problem that thematically links the three narratives (Walton's, Victor's and the Creature's) as a "problem of 'haves' and 'have nots' with respect to the highly desirable experience of domestic affection."[13] The problem with the bourgeois family is that domestic affection is isolated

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12. These essays exemplify important tendencies in the scholarship on *Frankenstein*, but the list of them is not meant to be exhaustive.

13. Kate Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 182.

from Walton's and Victor's scientific pursuits, which occur in the pub-
lic world away (presumably) from women. This is ultimately the argu-
ment of Johanna M. Smith, who sees the novel as a negotiation of
feminine and masculine traits needed for social harmony.[14] But in a
society in which these traits correspond to separate gendered spheres,
the danger of invasion is ever-present. For Smith, the novel's social
critique lies in the exploration of this danger.

For both Ellis and Smith, the focus of the novel is on the domestic
scene: its gendered virtues, its gender tensions, its exclusivity and its
oppressiveness to both men and women. They note that Mary Shel-
ley understands that the domestic sphere's raison d'être is impossible.
What these interpretations of domestic ideology expose with respect
to *Frankenstein* is the inability of the bourgeois family or of domes-
tic/feminine virtues appropriately to educate Victor in a way that will
enable him to traverse the public and private spheres, to be a produc-
tive but affectionate man. Instead, for both Ellis and Smith, domestic
affections are alienated by other forces outside the home, and those
other forces are anathema to the enclosed space of the domestic. That
space is symbolized within the novel as a specific kind of discourse
isolated from "public" space.

Mary Shelley's novel, then, becomes a critique of domestic relations
for which the Creature appears as a limitation on the possibility of
domestic harmony. He compels Victor's alienation from his family and
Clerval both before and after his creation, but he is also the product
of that alienation. The Creature, as Victor's double, is similarly alien-
ated—from his creator, from the De Laceys, and from both domestic
and public spheres. The Creature is not a part of any sphere, of any
love or familial relationship. Though family, love, and usefulness are
what he desires, his efforts to acquire them ultimately fail because he
functions structurally in the novel as the contradiction.

Much critical discussion of the domestic neglects science, though
scientific curiosity lures Victor away from his home. However, the dis-
course of science informs several compelling readings of the novel. As
Stuart Curran recently suggested, "literally, from first to last, [scien-

14. Johanna M. Smith, "Cooped Up," p. 317. The appearance of both Smith's and Montag's articles in
the *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism on* Frankenstein as illustrations of Feminism and Marxism,
respectively, has increased their importance.

tific] discourse informs the novel, and ... it is essential that we enlarge our perspective in order to recognize how all aspects of the novel are unified by its scientific context."[15] Curran points to the novel's opening in which Walton declares his lust for discovery based on an Enlightenment belief that the pursuit of knowledge will benefit humankind. The affinity between Walton and Victor is based on this belief. For both, human progress absolutely depends on this pursuit, which requires the courage of a scientist's convictions as well as his intellect. The ideal of scientific progress, albeit a tortured and conflicted progress, is represented by their meeting: Victor as the master possessing knowledge and Walton naïvely learning to distinguish "good" from "bad" science. Anne K. Mellor has suggested that Mary Shelley used her knowledge of recent scientific developments to distinguish between what she considered "good" science, "the detailed and reverent description of the workings of nature," and "bad" science, "the hubristic manipulation of the forces of nature to serve man's private ends."[16] *Frankenstein*, then, can be appreciated as a critique of science that analyzes the implications of science and its practices, which centrally involve Victor's usurpation of "Nature"construed as female. For Mellor, Victor's "bad" science is bad because it serves patriarchal power and is not at odds with Enlightenment ideals. Its alignment with Enlightenment ideals is not the issue.

The problem is, as Warren Montag notes, that the Creature *is* a product of Enlightenment Rationalism, science and technology. Thus the novel "rejects one of the most fundamental myths of the Enlightenment, the notion that scientific and economic progress will continually improve the condition of humankind, the idea that once the barriers to knowledge are pushed aside, the conditions for perpetual peace and a universal harmony will have been established."[17] Herein lies the ideological contradiction. It is not that one kind of science is useful and another pernicious, and we can "freely" choose between the two, but that science is one modality in the history of capitalism, and it has its own desires, its own logic, its own ontology, which in-

15. Stuart Curran, "The Scientific Grounding of *Frankenstein*," in *Mary vs. Mary*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli (Naples: Liguori Editore, 2001), p. 285.

16. Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, p. 90.

17. Montag, "Workshop," p. 391.

stead of strengthening human institutions "introduces separateness, division, and antagonism into the social world."[18] Thus, Victor is the "instrument" of science, dehumanized as much as the Creature, debased as Nature is construed as female. For Montag, Enlightenment "progress" is an illusion: the real force of historical progress is destruction and oppression. Mary Shelley, therefore, has critiqued the first phase of capitalism, lending "her voice to the voiceless, those who, bowed and numbed by oppression and poverty, cannot speak for themselves."[19]

Both Mellor and Montag read *Frankenstein* as a critique of science that exposes its transgressions: for Mellor, "to usurp the power of reproduction is to usurp the power of production" or, rather, an attempt to exploit Nature (women) for the gain of the ruling class represented by Victor; for Montag, Enlightenment science has "produced the means of its own destruction: the industrial working class, that fabricated collectivity whose interests are irreconcilable with those of capital."[20] What science fails to do in both these readings is to reconcile Victor's scientific work with the notion of "progress" that is beneficial to humankind. Victor is not the scientist in control of his work, his product, his actions, or his ultimate fate. At the end of Victor's pursuit is the Creature, who limits Victor's desire for knowledge, his conquest of the unknown, his power over creation; he limits Victor's progress. The Creature, as a product of science that is both miraculous and destructive, restricts Victor in ways that Victor's self-control, Walton's scientific ethics, or either's familial affections, could not. After the creation scene, Victor's narrative shifts its focus away from scientific pursuit. When the implications of scientific discourse reappear later in the attempt to make a female Creature, Victor recognizes the limits of science and aborts his second creation. But the damage is already done. The Creature and Victor are by then caught in the contradiction of scientific progress in which destruction of selves and others is the ultimate limit.

The focus on scientific discourse poses questions about imagination, creation and aesthetics. Alan Bewell has linked obstetrics and

18. Montag, p. 391.
19. Montag, p. 388.
20. Mellor, p. 113; Montag, p. 388.

female imagination in order to claim that Mary Shelley made "obstetrics the master-code of her aesthetics and applied its concrete arguments, about the creative power of a mother's psyche upon the fetus and the proper environment for human production, to criticize and to curb the excesses of male Romantic imaginations."[21] Science is used, not as an end unto itself, but as a means of commenting upon aesthetics and the seemingly monstrous, uncontainable masculine imagination.

For Denise Gigante, the question of aesthetic is a matter of "ugliness" as a "positive fact."[22] Countering readings of the Creature as a representation of sublimity, Gigante sees him as "the material abhorrence that leaks through representation to disorder the mind of the subject." She continues: "We may imagine beauty as a form causing delight, but the ugly stops us in our tracks as something we can't even imagine."[23] Thus, neither the Creature nor Victor's sublime experiences in the Alps and in the Valley of Chamounix can inspire the imagination to conceive of the power of the human mind by contemplation of the "terrible" or the "beautiful." The Creature is neither; he is ugly, an "aesthetic impossibility" that resists the reproduction of the day's aesthetic ideology.[24]

For both Bewell and Gigante, the novel discredits Romantic notions of the imagination and of aesthetics: for Bewell, the imagination of the male is critiqued as the appropriation of female imagination, leading to the "hideous progeny" that eliminates Victor's creative, sexual and imaginative desires; for Gigante, novel and Creature represent an "anti-"aesthetic theory that posits ugliness as positive transgression, a kind of chaos counterbalancing Edmund Burke's "pleasing illusions" that "contain—and sustain—society."[25] The ideology of the aesthetic exposed in both readings is the inadequate negotiation of the material and the immaterial in the novel: the body, the imagination, and what the product of that negotiation means or fails to mean. The attempt to unify the composite body of the Creature through

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21. Bewell, "Monstrous Desire," p. 108.
22. Denise Gigante, "Facing the Ugly: The Case of *Frankenstein*," *Genre* 20 (Spring 2000), 569.
23. Gigante, p. 578.
24. Gigante, p. 583.
25. Gigante, p. 568.

Victor's well-developed imagination (and scientific reasoning) is successful. However, unless the Creature projects the readiness and capacity for "feeling" (as constructed in the early nineteenth-century novel), he will not evoke sympathetic understanding, the goal of aesthetic production. In the Creature's "ugliness" Romantic aesthetics fails to create the sympathetic world Mary Shelley's husband proclaimed poets would legislate. Instead, aesthetic practice is irresponsible, breeding unsatisfiable bodily desires.

This point about aesthetics leads us to the ideology of the aesthetic form of the novel. What happens if we look not at the Creature as the aesthetic production or lack thereof, as Gigante does, but at the discourse that speaks of the sublime and natural beauty within the novel itself? Each time he encounters the "product" of science, Victor appears in a state of sublime contemplation: terrified at the sight of his creation (p. 39), caught in a storm in the Alps on his way to Geneva, or awed by Mont Blanc while hiking toward the Valley of Chamounix.[26] At each moment, a "silence" occurs in the text, a formal silence, as well as a literal one—Victor cannot speak.[27] When he first sees his creation, words fail Victor; his horror at the sight is told in its incompleteness: "How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe" (p. 39). When Victor realizes the Creature is William's murderer, he resolves to "remain silent" (p. 55) with his family on the matter. Finally, when the Creature confronts him, Victor's "rage and hatred first deprived me of utterance" (p. 74), and upon listening to the Creature's tale, Victor does not answer, but simply follows the Creature across the ice (p. 76).

At each point of silence, of Victor's inarticulateness when confronted by the Creature, there is a transition in the narrative from one discourse to another. In the first example, a turn from the "terror" of the sublime to the comfort of the beautiful is symbolized by Clerval's visit to Victor's apartments and Clerval's subsequent "nurs[ing]" of

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26. All quotations from *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, 8 vols., gen. ed. Nora Crook (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1996), vol. 1. Hereafter I will cite only the page number in the text from volume one of this edition.

27. James R. Kincaid has also noticed this "silence" in *Frankenstein*, though he does not draw the same conclusions I have. See Kincaid, "'Words Cannot Express': Frankenstein's Tripping on the Tongue," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 24 (1990), 26–47.

Victor's fever (p. 43). Clerval represents the true, the good, the beautiful; interestingly, Elizabeth, who is inured to the domestic, does not function in this way. Clerval calls forth "the better feelings of [Victor's] heart" and endeavors to "elevate" his "mind" (p. 49); he is "a being formed in the 'very poetry of nature'" (p. 120). He balances the sublime with his beauty. In the second example, the narrative turns from the sublime "terror" to the domestic when Victor rejoins his family; and in the third, the sublime turns to the Creature's narrative of the "natural man" which propels the next several chapters of the novel. The point is that the novel fails to achieve the movement of the narrative to "unify" its parts. Thus, the shifting of discourses and of points of view happens not only on a thematic (content) level, but also on the level of formal presentation of the content. The resulting silences represent the failure, or perhaps more precisely, the limitations of representation. The discourse of aesthetics, like those of science and domesticity, becomes isolated within the narrative, serving to propel the plot forward, by the very limits, or ideological contradictions if you will, of those particular discourses.

   This limitation is the point; the very source of the novel's critical success is its limitation of representation, which enables varied critiques of the multiple discourses that inhabit the novel. That limit, the aporia produced by the mixing of discourses, enables us to see the impossibility of aesthetic unity by distanciating the discursive content from the novel's form. However, though the ideological content produces these limitations, reading the content with an eye also focussed on the novel's form suggests not just an ideological critique, as previous critics would have it, but the actual production of the Romantic ideology of transcendence.

II

How does the Creature function to distanciate the content from the ideology of form? As we saw in the analysis of previous critical interpretations, the Creature threatens each of these three discourses, for it is he who stands at the respective limits. He is an ideological threat because he is born from a set of practices associated with those discourses: sentimentality and domesticity, scientific inquiry and experimentation, and sublime/philosophical contemplation. Yet, the Crea-

ture is also the formal manifestation of the internal contradictions in domestic, scientific and aesthetic discourses.

What the Creature means, as a metaphor, as a character, as representation of an abstract idea of the impossible, creates the novel's mode of operation. He is the ideological contradiction, given formal substance. He represents, if he is representable at all, the inability in discourse to align concretely one's perceptions, feelings, beliefs, and action—the essence of ideology—in order to make one's "imaginary" relations maintain a relationship to "lived" experience. For the novel's other characters and for its scholars, he disrupts and limits the spontaneous identification of ideology in the three discourses discussed. As Louis Althusser explains in "A Letter on Art":

> What art makes us *see*, and therefore gives to us in the form of *"seeing,"* *"perceiving"* and *"feeling"* (which is not a form of *knowing*), is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art and to which it *alludes.* . . . Balzac and Solzhenitsyn give us a "view" of ideology . . . which presupposes a *retreat*, and *internal distantiation* from the very ideology from which their novels emerged.[28]

Structurally, the Creature enables this "view" of ideology by acting as "symptom": an irruption of the ideological contradictions inherent in the various discourses, an irruption that gives rise to varied interpretations. In this sense he functions formally in relation to the function of the novel as a whole. The Creature exists at the point of contact with the domestic, scientific, and aesthetic discourses, enabling us to "see," "perceive" and "feel" the ideologies that the novel presumes and shapes as its content: patriarchy and family as a source of order and comfort; the "progress" of scientific knowledge leading to human perfection; and the aesthetic, which inspires humans to imagine that their minds can apprehend the truth of nature. The novel's internal distanciation works because the Creature operates as a formal mechanism from which ideology can be "detached," to use Althusser's term above. Thus, the Creature enables the exposure of ideology in each

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28. Louis Althusser, "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 222–23. I have kept the original emphasis and original spelling.

particular discourse: he is the illegitimate child of Victor, born by circumventing woman and family; his relationship to Victor represents the corruption, as well as the extremity, of patriarchy. He is the extreme of technological innovation: instead of a window to progressive knowledge, his creation is kept secret and creates destruction. He disrupts the aesthetic contemplation of the sublime; he is the ugly, artificial production of masculine creativity.

The Creature also operates as the Other for Victor, another who serves to position desire in terms of absence; the Creature is the absence of meaning, the limit of what particular discourses can say. For Victor, the chaos of contradictions that have emerged in this "lived" relationship to reality are attributed to the Creature; that is, the Creature disrupts the meaning that has heretofore structured Victor's life—an "imaginary" relation in which the subject recognizes himself. The Creature disrupts Victor's process of interpellation, or, in other words, his process of identification with the socio-ideological structures of language that would give him a meaningful position within the Symbolic Order. As Jacques Lacan asserts, "Language is as much there to found us in the Other as to drastically prevent us from understanding him." He writes, "Our relation with the Other plays on this ambiguity."[29] In the novel, this ambiguity may be found in the formal use of the double. The Creature as Frankenstein's double serves as a "shadow [to Victor—the subject] and gives body to a certain surplus" which "represents what the subject must renounce."[30] This surplus creates the silence in Victor's confrontation of his Creature; Victor experiences himself in gazing at the creature, and what constitutes himself is what is prohibited (repressed, excluded) by his symbolic identity. That experience is unbearable—hence, the horror.

Tragically, Victor's terminal point is the dissolution of his imaginary relationship to social practices. To put it another way, Victor stands on the boundary between the Imaginary and Symbolic Order, unable to create meaning, unable to do anything but chase the form of his Creature, who symbolizes the experience of himself "conceived under

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29. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and the Techniques of Psychoanalysis 1954–55,* trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, ed. Jacques-Allain Miller (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 244.

30. Žižek, "Grimaces," p. 54.

another modality, that of the other, sublime, ethereal body, pure substance of enjoyment . . . exempted from generation and corruption."[31] He needs to destroy the Creature for revenge, yes, but also to enact the untenable recognition that his subjectivity is caught between the need to make meaning and the inability to do it.

While the Creature implements this threat to "engulf the subject," Victor avoids the act of recognition. Victor's retrospective narrative to Walton attempts to create meaning by situating himself in an "order," as part of a signifying chain of patriarchy and family to which he no longer belongs: "I am by birth a Genevese; and my family is one of the most distinguished of that republic," he claims. "My ancestors had been for many years counsellors and syndics; and my father had filled several public situations with honor and reputation" (p. 21). Increasingly, Victor becomes isolated as the "order" of his life dissolves: "And the same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget the friends who were so many miles absent, and whom I had not seen for so long a time," he says; "I knew my silence disquieted them" (p. 38). As Victor loses his loved ones to the Creature's destruction, he also loses his ability to create meaning for his scientific work and for his life:

> I had begun life with benevolent intentions, and thirsted for the moment when I should put them in practice, and make myself useful to my fellow-beings. Now all was blasted: instead of that serenity of conscience, which allowed me to look back upon the past with self-satisfaction, and from thence to gather promise of new hopes, I was seized by remorse and the sense of guilt, which hurried me away to a hell of intense tortures, such as no language can describe. (p. 67)

By the end of Victor's narrative, Victor is without family, without position or profession, isolated physically from the social world, chasing after a "form" that eludes him. His sole remaining connection—a tenuous one—is Walton. He hopes that Walton will succeed where he has failed: "Yet do I dare ask you to undertake my pilgrimage . . . No; I am not so selfish. . . . if the ministers of vengeance should conduct

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31. Žižek, p. 55.

him to you, swear that he shall not live" (p. 159). Thus, as Victor's language and social connections fail, he retreats to a position in which only the Creature, as Other, can give him any subjective identification, fraught as it is with incoherence and contradiction, and leaving Victor's subjectivity radically sutured.

But the Creature is also a character in the text who tells his tale. So he serves another formal function, as a point of view, a narrative position in the text. His position is the excess of the Symbolic, or what Lacan would call the Real; that is, he is the very thing that cannot be inserted into the Symbolic Order, that which cannot be explained. The Creature recognizes his own radical otherness. He is "born" already beyond the Symbolic Order, and for that beyondness he is consigned to oblivion—without relation to family, home, nature, beauty. As Peter Brooks has commented, the Creature is patterned on narratives of the "natural man" or noble savage, which hope that a being developing alone in a natural state will acquire benevolence and shun artificiality.[32] Morality is innate if left in a natural state; culture corrupts morality. As the Creature acquires language, by listening to the De Laceys, he realizes that language produces emotions: "These people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers" (p. 83). Language binds people together in emotional ties. As Brooks notes, the Creature is intrigued by language because "by its very nature it implies the 'chain of existence and events' within which he seeks a place."[33] In contrast to Victor's eroded speech, the Creature articulately extols the "godlike science" of words and the "art of language." It is through language that he hopes to create a social relationship: "I imagined that they would be disgusted, until, by my gentle demeanour and conciliating words, I should first win their favour, and afterwards their love" (pp. 85–86). The Creature sees language as the vehicle by which he

32. Peter Brooks, "'Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts': Language, Nature, and Monstrosity," in *The Endurance of* Frankenstein: *Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepflmacher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 209–10.

33. Brooks, p. 210.

can fulfill his desire for a place in the social order, a desire caused by the desertion of Victor as his father/creator, and to be a useful "invisible hand" which will assist the De Laceys in their labors.

But the Creature is mistaken, seduced by the eloquence of language. He fails in his attempt to win the De Laceys' love because words cannot always cover the gap between the material and abstract and make them exist in aesthetic harmony, as the Creature "imagined" they could. He cannot be a Subject in "the strange system of human society" (p. 89): "And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. . . . I was not even of the same nature as man. . . . When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me" (p. 89). It is not language alone that ties humanity together, but language's uses for expressing and representing the relations of that social system, and that use is the work of ideology. This is the vital information the Creature learns from listening to Felix's explanation of society. The Creature, in his own narrative, when confronted with the domestic space of the De Laceys, cannot be symbolized within the structure of language, and consequently has no place in the signifying chain or within the social system. The source of the Creature's monstrosity is that he "lays bare" the contradictions within the social system; he cannot be integrated within it because he represents the Real, or rather, what the system cannot account for. The Creature's inability to find a family, home, or position in the Symbolic network, where he can be made sense of by others, or his inability, in the end, to make sense of himself as an individual "human" being, is really an inability of language to fill the gap between the Symbolic and the Real. So, like Victor, the Creature as a character cannot be interpellated into the domestic ideology represented by the De Laceys, and thus remains without place, without relation and is, by the end of the novel, "lost in darkness and distance" (p. 170).[34]

III

With this view of the Creature's function as a formal device that distanciates ideologies inherent in the discourses in *Frankenstein*, we can

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34. Mellor claims that the De Laceys represent the "loving and egalitarian bourgeois family" that is the basis of Mary Shelley's "celebration" of "polis-as-family." See Mellor, *Mary Shelley*, pp. 88–89.

now ask, how is the distancing of the novel's content related to the ideology it produces in its form? In the overall non-integration of discourses, in the failure of each discourse alone to sustain the novel, in the use of the Creature as a figure to expose and subvert particular ideologies, *Frankenstein* produces the essential Romantic ideology: the progression of humanity exists by "transcending" the limitations of any particular discourse toward a universal apprehension of meanings that belies the novel's contradictory nature and its mixed discourses, making it "safe" in a seemingly non-authoritarian and participatory way. This ideology of form—transcendence—neutralizes the struggle of the text's particular discourses to establish meaning for Victor, for the Creature, and for us. The terror of the novel's ideological contradictions is made "safe" for the reader because the ideology inherent in the form of the novel contains its own internal, particular ideological transgressions. Readers make a quest, along with Walton, Victor, the Creature, to find true meaning that binds together all these stories.

We have already discussed how the Creature is the formal device that marks the limit of each particular discourse and enables the internal distanciation of its ideology. But this is more a matter of the exposure of ideology on the level of content. In this sense, the novel does subvert the particular domestic, scientific, and aesthetic discourses it engages. Each discourse fails to interpellate Victor and the Creature. Critics correctly interpret the novel as a critique of social relations and as demystifying the ideologies of gender, science, and the aesthetic. At the level of content, the novel seems to produce not ideology, but ideological critique.

But how, then, does the novel's heterogeneity work to provide a satisfying aesthetic production? Fredric Jameson discusses the ideology of form (rather than of content) as a strategy of containment by which one may "grasp such formal processes as sedimented content in their own right, as carrying ideological messages of their own, distinct from the ostensible or manifest content of the works."[35] The ideological "message" that can be apprehended from an analysis of form is the continual innovation of ideology though a momentary contextual critique of it, and the production of another ideology that will super-

35. Jameson stresses that the apprehension of form is born of our historical moment and will tell us something about a former mode of (literary) production. See Jameson, pp. 99–102.

sede the "exposed" particular ideologies. This dual function of distanciation and social critique, on the level of content, and identification and interpellation, on the level of form, is the "message" of *Frankenstein*. In other words, the ideological content is critiqued only in order to validate another ideology that subsumes the contradictions of the others, which have failed adequately to supply an imaginary relation.

The shifting of discourses we noted earlier produces an ideology by which the form of the novel integrates multiple discourses, using them to contextualize each other and to validate the ideology of "transcendence" above any particular ideology or discourse. For example, juxtaposing each particular discourse enables the overall progression of the narrative, whether the point of view is Victor's, Walton's, or the Creature's. When the narrative breaks, as in the transition from the domestic into the sublime, the discourse is understood only in reference to its relationship to another discourse—that is, when one discourse "fails" to propel the narrative forward, the end is picked up by a new discourse that seems the inevitable outcome of the failed discourse, giving the illusion of unity, if not consistency. When Victor discards the aborted second Creature, he for the first time "saw clearly" the ethical dilemma that faces the scientist—to understand and respect "nature," rather than use it for one's own "profit": "to create another like the fiend I had first made would be an act of the basest and most atrocious selfishness" (p. 132). After Victor pauses because "it requires all my fortitude to recall the memory of the frightful events which I am about to relate," the discourse shifts to a "legal" discussion that provokes terror in Victor: "I remembered the murder of my brother, and felt myself extremely agitated; my limbs trembled, and a mist came over my eyes, which obliged me to lean on a chair for support" (p. 136). Victor is horrified to discover Clerval stretched before him. Though Victor's terror is induced by the Creature's actions, rather than by his physical presence, the scene still stresses Victor's usurpation of familial affection. The effect of the transition is to position the scientific question of ethics in juxtaposition to the familial affection that Victor feels for Clerval and to note that they are both undercut by the existence of the Creature, both as a metaphor of discursive limitation and a character who acts and propels the plot of the novel. The progression of the overall structure of

the narrative is *not* limited by the Creature, and this is the important point. The overall progression of the narrative "transcends" the concerns of the Creature, of Victor, and eventually of Walton, and leads us not to a conclusion of the narrative, nor to a unity of the truth, nor to an ethical position to take up, but to the idea of transcendence as an end of fiction in itself.

The novel's form further exhibits the ideology of transcendence by the three narratives' enactment of a "universalizing" metaphor. Since the Creature's story is narrated by Victor, and Victor's story is narrated in letter form by Walton, the narratives and narrators are mutually refracted. By this layering, Mary A. Favret comments, the "novel works to show the limits of . . . individuality and to replace the individual voice with a network of voices"; she adds, "The principle of life is not individual, nor does it proceed in a straight line."[36] It is not the individual voice that matters, but the conflation of voices that rise above the particular to reach toward a "universal" concept of humanity. In terms of the interlocking narratives, the novel's form "transcends" the particular narrator's voice to achieve a narrative echo that is non-authoritarian. Thus, each narrative is independently validated within the context of the novel, enabling "mutual authority [to] extend over a common field of reference, overwhelming any one-way reading."[37] In other words, narrative authority is given neither to Victor, nor Walton, nor the Creature, but in effect to all of them, or perhaps to none of them. The novel doesn't take sides, but structures the narratives as a way to transcend any particular narrative position. This transcendence may be what the *Quarterly Review* found so disconcerting about the novel: "It inculcates no lesson of conduct, manners or morality."[38] It would seem that the novel's function was less than clear to its first readers. But rather than seeing the novel as dialogic, as Favret does, I see this formal structure as a production of the ideology of literary transcendence and part of Romantic discourse.

By shifting discourses, by layering narrative positions, the novel's form neutralizes the struggle for meaning; the terror of incoherence is transcended and the reading experience is made safe and pleasura-

36. Mary Favret, "The Letters of *Frankenstein*," *Genre* 20 (Spring 1987), 5.
37. Favret, p. 7.
38. Quoted in Favret, p. 21.

ble. In the end, Margaret Saville, Walton's absent reader, receives the narratives and discourses enclosed within *Frankenstein*. The absent reader is us; we participate in an aesthetic experience that enables us to see and feel what is beyond our particular experiences. Form establishes and validates the aesthetic notion of literary "transcendence" as the ultimate goal of reading literature as part of a primary, constructed, and historically specific ideology of Romanticism. This is the function of the novel, produced within the historical project of Romanticism and positioned within its aesthetic constructs. The form of *Frankenstein* operates as transcendent signifier, one that promises to reveal its truth. We, as faithful readers, keep looking. But the novel attracts us by doing what we think novels should do: producing an ideology of transcendence that contains an ideological critique. The novel thus enables a certain kind of safe reading and a consumable aesthetic experience that validates the universal over the particular, the abstract over the concrete, and in doing so unites its readers, in a plethora of ideological contradictions and contestations that we enjoy and that lead to only one kind of action—endless interpretation.

Because of this endlessness, *Frankenstein* has survived as a cultural touchstone, subject to various textual interventions in films, adaptations, and popular allusions. The Creature and Victor Frankenstein have become free-floating signifiers in our modern culture, exceeding the grasp of the novel, and lending themselves to all varieties of interpretation. This is in part due, paradoxically, to its critical history. To recognize how *Frankenstein* works as a novel is to recognize how the ideology that *Frankenstein* produces—transcendence—is still the lauded part of our literary history. *Frankenstein* succeeds in producing a form of literary discourse that successfully interpellates its readers, scholarly and novice, into a different ideology: the expectation that texts should produce the effect of transcendence. The ideology of transcendence, apprehended through the form of this Romantic novel, creates the possibility of this textual expectation.

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