AFTERWARD

. . . there is a fire
And motion of the soul which will not dwell
In its own narrow being, but aspire
Beyond the fitting medium of desire . . .

-Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*
  Canto III

. . . Ere Babylon was dust,
The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child,
Met his own image walking in the garden.
That apparition, sole of men, he saw.
For know there are two worlds, of life and death:
One that which thou beholdest; but the other
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit
The shadows of all forms that think and live
Till death unite them and they part no more . . .

-Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*
  Act I

THE motion picture viewer who carries his obscure but still authentic taste for the sublime to the neighborhood theater, there to see the latest in an unending series of *Frankenstein* s, becomes a sharer in a romantic terror now nearly one hundred and fifty years old. Mary Shelley, barely nineteen years of age when she wrote the original *Frankenstein*, was the daughter of two great intellectual rebels, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, and the second wife of Percy Bysshe Shelley, another great rebel and an unmatched lyrical poet. Had she written nothing, Mary Shelley would be remembered today. She is remembered in her own right as the author of a novel valuable in itself but also prophetic of an intellectual world to come, a novel depicting a *Prometheanism* that is with us still.

“FRANKENSTEIN,” to most of us, is the name of a monster rather than of a monster’s creator, for the common reader and the common viewer have worked together, in their apparent confusion, to create a myth soundly based on a central duality in Mrs. Shelley’s novel. A critical discussion of *Frankenstein* needs to begin from an
insight first recorded by Richard Church and Muriel Spark: the monster and his creator are the antithetical halves of a single being. Miss Spark states the antithesis too cleanly; for Victor Frankenstein represents the feelings, and his nameless creature the intellect. In her view the monster has no emotion and “what passes for emotion . . . are really intellectual passions arrived at through rational channels.” Miss Spark carries this argument far enough to insist that the monster is asexual and that he demands a bride from Frankenstein only for companionship, a conclusion evidently at variance with the novel’s text.

THE antithesis between the scientist and his creature in Frankenstein is a very complex one and can be described more fully in the larger context of Romantic Literature and its characteristic mythology. The shadow or double of the self is a constant conceptual image in Blake and Shelley and a frequent image, more random and descriptive, in the other major Romantics, especially in Byron. In Frankenstein it is the dominant and recurrent image and accounts for much of the latent power the novel possesses.

MARY Shelley’s husband was a divided being, as man, as poet, just as his friend Byron was, though in Shelley, the split was more radical. Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus is the full title of Mrs. Shelley’s novel, and while Victor Frankenstein is not Shelley (Clerval is rather more like the poet), the Modern Prometheus is a very apt term for Shelley or Byron. Prometheus is the mythical figure who best suits the uses of Romantic poetry, for no other traditional being has in him the full range of Romantic and moral sensibility and the full Romantic capacity for creation and destruction.

NO Romantic writer employed the Prometheus archetype without full awareness of its equivocal potentialities. The Prometheus of the ancients had been for the most part a spiritually reprehensible figure, though frequently a sympathetic one, in terms both of his dramatic situation and in his close alliance with mankind against the gods. But this alliance had been ruinous for man in most versions of the myth, and the Titan’s benevolence towards humanity was hardly sufficient recompense for the alienation of man from heaven that he had brought about. Both sides of Titanism are evident in earlier Christian references to the story. The same Prometheus who is taken as an analogue of the crucified Christ is regarded also as a type of Lucifer, a son of light justly cast out by an offended heaven.

IN the Romantic readings of Milton’s Paradise Lost (and Frankenstein is implicitly on such reading) this double identity of Prometheus is a vital element. Blake, whose mythic revolutionary named Orc is another version of Prometheus, saw Milton’s Satan as a Prometheus gone wrong, as desire restrained until it became only the shadow of desire, a diminished double of creative energy. Shelley went further in judging Milton’s Satan as an imperfect Prometheus, inadequate because his mixture of heroic and base qualities engendered in the reader’s mind a “pernicious casuistry” inimical to the spirit of art.
BLAKE, more sympathetic a poet than Shelley, worked out an antithesis between symbolic figures he named Spectre and Emanation, the shadow of desire and the total form of desire, respectively. A reader of Frankenstein, recalling the novel’s extraordinary conclusion, with its scenes of obsessional pursuit through the Arctic wastes, can recognize the same imagery applied to a similar symbolic situation in Blake’s lyric on the strife of Spectre and Emanation:

My Spectre around me night and day
Like a Wild beast guards my way.
My Emanation far within
Weeps incessantly for my Sin.

A Fathomless and boundless deep,
There we wander, there we weep;
On the hungry craving wind
My Spectre follows thee behind.

He scents thy footsteps in the snow,
Wheresoever thou dost go
Thro’ the wintry hail and rain . . .

FRANKENSTEIN’S monster, tempting his revengeful creator on through a world of ice, is another Emanation pursued by a Spectre, with the enormous difference that he is an Emanation flawed, a nightmare of actuality, rather than a dream of desire. Though abhorred rather than loved, the monster is the total form of Frankenstein’s creative power and is more imaginative than his creator. The monster is at once more intellectual and more emotional than his maker; indeed he excels Frankenstein as much (and in the same ways) as Milton’s Adam excels Milton’s God in Paradise Lost. The greatest paradox and most astonishing achievement of Mary Shelley’s novel is that the monster is more human than his creator. This nameless being, as much a Modern Adam as his creator is a Modern Prometheus, is more loveable than his creator and more hateful, more to be pitied and more to be feared, and above all more able to give the attentive reader that shock of added consciousness in which aesthetic recognition compels a heightened realization of the self. For like Blake’s Spectre and Emanation or Shelley’s Alastor and Epipsyche, Frankenstein and his monster are the solipsistic and generous halves of the one self. Frankenstein is the mind and emotions turned in upon themselves, and his creature is the mind and emotions turned imaginatively outward, seeking a greater humanization through confrontation of the other selves.
I am suggesting that what makes *Frankenstein* an important book, though it is only a strong, flawed novel with frequent clumsiness in its narrative and characterizations, is that it contains one of the most vivid versions we have of the Romantic mythology of the self, one that resembles Blake’s *Book of Urizen*, Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, and Byron’s *Manfred*, among other works. Because it lacks the sophistication and imaginative complexity of such works, *Frankenstein* affords a unique introduction to the archetypal world of the Romantics.

WILLIAM Godwin, though a tendentious novelist, was a powerful one, and the prehistory of his daughter’s novel begins with his best work of fiction, *Caleb Williams* (1794). Godwin summarizes the climactic (and harrowing) final third of his novel as a pattern of flight and pursuit, he fugitive in perpetual apprehension of being overwhelmed with the worst of calamities, victim in a state of the most fearful alarm. Mary Shelley brilliantly reverses this pattern in the final sequence of her novel, and she takes from *Caleb Williams* also her destructive theme of the monster’s war against “the whole machinery of human society,” to quote the words of Caleb Williams while in prison. Muriel Spark argues that *Frankenstein* can be read as a reaction “against the rational-humanism of Godwin and Shelley,” and she points to the equivocal preface that Shelley wrote to his wife’s novel, in order to support this view. Certainly Shelley was worried lest the novel be taken as a warning against the inevitable moral consequences of an unchecked experimental Prometheanism and scientific materialism. This preface insists that:

> The opinion which naturally spring from the character and situation of the hero are by no means to be conceived as existing always in my own conviction; nor is any inference justly to be drawn from the following pages as prejudicing any philosophical doctrine of whatever kind.

SHELLEY has, throughout his own work, a constant reaction against Godwin’s rational humanism, but his reaction was systematically and consciously one of heart against head. In the same summer in the Swiss Alps that saw the conception of *Frankenstein*, Shelley composed two poems that lift the thematic conflict of the novel to the level of the true sublime. In the *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* the poet’s heart interprets an inconsistent grace and loveliness, always just beyond the range of human senses, as being the only beneficent force in life, and he prays to this force to be more constant in its attendance upon him and all mankind. In a greater sister-hymn, *Mont Blanc*, an awesome meditation upon a frightening natural scene, the poet’s head issues an allied but essentially contrary report. The force, or power, is there, behind or within the mountain, but its external workings upon us are either indifferent or malevolent, and this power is not to be prayed to. It can teach us, but what it teaches us is our own dangerous freedom from nature, the necessity for our will to become a significant part of materialistic necessity. Though *Mont Blanc* works its way to an almost heroic conclusion, it is also a poem of horror and reminds us that Frankenstein first confronts his conscious monster in the brooding presence of Mont Blanc, and to the restless music of one of Shelley’s lyrics of Mutability.
IN *Prometheus Unbound* the split between head and heart is not healed, but the heart is allowed dominance. The hero, Prometheus, like Frankenstein, has made a monster, but this monster is Jupiter, the God of all institutional and historical religions, including organized Christianity. Salvation from this conceptual error comes through the heart’s promptings, through love alone; but love in this poem, as elsewhere in Shelley, is always closely shadowed by ruin. Indeed, what choice spirits in Shelley perpetually encounter is ruin masquerading as love, pain presenting itself as pleasure. The tentative way out of this situation in Shelley’s poetry is through the quest for a feeling mind and an understanding heart, which is symbolized by the sexual reunion of Prometheus and his Emanation, Asia. Fredrick A. Pottle sums up *Prometheus Unbound* by observing its meaning to be that “the head must sincerely forgive, must willingly eschew hatred on purely experimental grounds,” while “the affectations must exorcize the daemons of infancy, whether personal or of a race.” In the light cast by these profound and precise summations, the reader can better understand both Shelley’s lyrical drama and his wife’s narrative of the Modern Prometheus.

THERE are two paradoxes at the center of Mrs. Shelley’s novel, and each illuminates a dilemma of the Promethean imagination. The first is that Frankenstein was successful, in that he did create Natural Man, not as he was, but as the meliorists saw such a man; indeed, Frankenstein did better than this, since his creature was, as we have seen, more imaginative than himself. Frankenstein’s tragedy stems not from his Promethean excess but from his own moral error, his failure to love; he *abhorred his creature*, became terrified, and fled his responsibilities.

THE second paradox is the more ironic. This either would not have happened or would not have mattered anyway, if Frankenstein has been an aesthetically successful maker: a beautiful “monster,” or even a passable one, would not have been a monster. As the creature bitterly observes in Chapter 17:

> Shall I respect a man when he contemns me? Let him live with me in the interchange of kindness, and instead of injury I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude at his acceptance. But that cannot be; the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union.

AS the hideousness of his creature was no part of Victor Frankenstein’s intention, it is worth noticing how this disastrous matter came to be.

IT would not be unjust to characterize Victor Frankenstein, in his act of creation, as being momentarily a moral idiot, like so many who have done work after him. There is an indeliberate humor in the contrast between the enormity of the scientist’s discovery and the mundane emotions of the discoverer. Finding that “the minuteness of the parts” slows him down, he resolves to make his creature “about eight feet in height and proportionately
large.” As he works on, he allows himself to dream that “a new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me.” Yet he knows his is a “workshop of filthy creation,” and he fails the fundamental test of his own creativity. When the “dull yellow eye” of his creature opens, this creator falls from the autonomy of a supreme artificer to the terror of a child of earth: “breathless horror and disgust filled my heart.” He flees his responsibility and sets in motion the events that will lead to his own Arctic immolation, a fit end for a being who has never achieved a full sense of another’s existence.

HAUNTING Mary Shelley’s novel is the demonic figure of the Ancient Mariner, Coleridge’s major venture into Romantic mythology of the purgatorial self trapped in the isolation of a heightened self-consciousness. Walton, in Letter 2 introducing the novel, compares himself “to that production of the most imaginative of modern poets.” As a seeker-out of an unknown passage, Walton is himself a Promethean quester, like Frankenstein, toward whom he is so compellingly drawn. Coleridge’s Mariner is of the line of Cain, and the irony of Frankenstein’s fate is that he too is Cain, involuntarily murdering all his loved ones through agency of his creature. The Ancient Mariner is punished by living under the curse of his consciousness of guilt, while the excruciating torment of Frankenstein is never to be able to forget his guilt in creating a lonely consciousness driven to crime by the rage of unwilling solitude.

IT is part of Mary Shelley’s insight into her mythological theme that all the monster’s victims are innocents. The monster not only refuses actively to slay his guilty creator, he mourns for him, though with the equivocal tribute of terming the scientist a “generous and self-devoted being.” Frankenstein, the Modern Prometheus who has violated nature, receives his epitaph from the ruined second nature he has made, the God-abandoned, who consciously echoes the ruined Satan of Paradise Lost and proclaims, “Evil thenceforth became my good.” It is imaginatively fitting that the greater and more interesting consciousness of the creature should survive his creator, for he alone in Mrs. Shelley’s novel possesses character. Frankenstein, like Coleridge’s Mariner, has no character in his own right; both figures win a claim to our attention only by their primordial crimes against original nature.

THE monster is of course Mary Shelley’s finest invention, and his narrative (Chapters 11 through 16) forms the highest achievement of the novel, more absorbing even than the magnificent and almost surrealistic pursuit of the climax. In an age so given to remarkable depictions of the dignity of natural man, an age including the shepherds and beggars of Wordsworth and what W. J. Bate has termed Keats’ “polar ideal of disinterestedness” – even in such a literary time Frankenstein’s hapless creature stands out as a sublime embodiment of heroic pathos. Though Frankenstein lacks the moral imagination to understand him, the daemon’s appeal is to what is most compassionate in us:
Oh Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember that 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 and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.

THE passage I have italicized is the imaginative kernel of the novel and is meant to remind the reader of the novel’s epigraph:

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mold me Man? Did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?

THAT desperate plangency of the fallen Adam becomes the characteristic accent of the daemon’s lamentations, with the influence of Milton cunningly built into the novel’s narrative by the happy devise of Frankenstein’s creature receiving his education through reading Paradise Lost “as a true history.” Already doomed because his standards are human, which makes him an outcast even to himself, his Miltonic education his fatal growth in self-consciousness. His story, as told to his maker, follows a familiar Romantic pattern “of the progress of my intellect,” as he puts it. His first pleasure after the dawn of consciousness comes through his wonder at seeing the moon rise. Caliban-like, he responds wonderfully to music, both natural and human, and his sensitivity to the natural world has the responsiveness of an incipient poet. His awakening to the first love for other beings, the intimates of the cottage he haunts, awakens him also to the great desolation of love rejected when he attempts to reveal himself. His own duality of situation and character, caught between the states of Adam and Satan, Natural Man and his thwarted desire, is related by him directly to his reading of Milton’s epic:

It moved every feeling of wonder and awe that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting. I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the special care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.
FROM a despair this profound, no release is possible. Driven forth into an existence upon which “the cold stars shone in mockery,” the daemon declares “everlasting war against the species” and enters upon a fallen existence more terrible than the expelled Adam’s. Echoing Milton, he asks the ironic question “And now, with the world before me, whither should I bens my steps?” to which the only possibly answer is, toward his wretched Promethean creator.

IF we stand back from Mary Shelley’s novel in order to better view its archetypal shape, we see it as a quest of a solitary and ravaged consciousness first for conclusion, then for revenge, and finally for a self-destruction that will be apocalyptic, that will bring down the creator with his creature. Though Mary Shelley may not have intended it, her novel’s prime theme is a necessary counterpoise to Prometheanism, for Prometheanism exalts the increase in consciousness despite all cost. Frankenstein breaks through the barrier that separates man from God and gives apparent life, but in doing so he gives only death-in-life. The profound dejection endemic in Mary Shelley’s novel is fundamental to the Romantic mythology of the self, for all Romantic horrors are diseases of excessive consciousness, of the self unable to bear the self. Kierkegaard remarks that Satan’s despair is absolute because Satan, as pure spirit, is pure consciousness, and for Satan (and all men in his predicament) every increase in consciousness is an increase in despair. Frankenstein’s desperate creature attains the state of pure spirit through his extraordinary situation and is racked by a consciousness in which every thought is a fresh disease.

A ROMANTIC poet fought against self-consciousness through the strength of what he called imagination, a more than rational energy by which thought could seek to heal itself. But Frankenstein’s daemon, though he is in the archetypal situation of the Romantic Wanderer, who sometimes was a poet, can win no release from its own story by telling it. His desperate desire for a mate is clearly an attempt to find a Shelleyan Epipsyche or Blakean Emanation for himself, a self within the self. But as he is the nightmare actualization of Frankenstein’s desire, he is himself an emanation of Promethean yearnings, and his only double is his creator and denier.

WHEN Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner progressed from the purgatory of consciousness to his very minimal control of imagination, he failed to save himself, since he remained in a cycle of remorse, but he at least became a salutary warning to others and made of the Wedding Guest a wiser and a better man. Frankenstein’s creature can help neither himself nor others, for he has no natural ground to which he can return. Romantic poets liked to return to the imagery of the ocean of life and immortality, for in the eddying to and fro of the healing waters they could picture a hoped-for process of restoration, of a survival of consciousness despite all its agonies. Mary Shelley, with marvelous appropriateness, brings her Romantic novel to a demonic conclusion in a world of ice. The frozen sea is the inevitable emblem for both the wretched daemon and his obsessed creator, but the daemon is allowed a final image of reversed Prometheanism. There is a heroism fully earned in the being who cries
farewell in a claim of sad triumph: “I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantlly and exult the agony of the torturing flames.” Mary Shelley could not have known how dark a prophecy this consummation of consciousness would prove to be for the summer of 1816, when her novel was conceived. Byron, writing his own epitaph at Missolonghi in 1824, and perhaps thinking back to having stood at Shelley’s funeral pile two years before, found an image similar to the daemon’s to sum up an exhausted existence:

The fire that on my bosom preys
   Is lone as come volcanic isle;
No torch is kindled at its blaze –
   A funeral pile.

THE fire of increased consciousness stolen from heaven ends as an isolated volcano cut off from the other selves by an estranging sea. “The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds” is the exultant cry of Frankenstein’s creature. A blaze at which no torch is kindled is Byron’s self-image, but he ends his death poem on another note, the hope for a soldier’s grave, which he found. There is no Promethean release, but release is perhaps not the burden of the literature of Romantic aspiration. There is something both Godwinian and Shelleyan about the final utterance of Victor Frankenstein, which is properly made to Walton, the failed Promethean whose ship has just turned back. Though chastened, the Modern Prometheus ends with a last word true, not to his accomplishments, but to his desire:

Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquility and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed.

SHELLEY’S Prometheus, crucified on his icy precipice, found his ultimate torment in Fury’s taunt: “And all best things are thus confused to ill.” It seems a fitting summation for all the work done by Modern Prometheanism and might have served as an alternate epigraph for Mary Shelley’s disturbing novel.

-Harold Bloom