Re-reading Myths at the Beginning of the Twenty-first Century

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The Myth of Creation in Reverse or the Disavowal of Genius in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein

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Abstract
According to Freud, disavowal implies the denial of a frightening reality, a defense mechanism that is triggered in the initial phase of psychosis. The term may also imply, like in the fiction I propose to analyze, a refusal to assume responsibility for the consequences of one’s deeds and, as such, it certainly leads to disastrous consequences. If Mary Shelley’s novel was intended as a critique of Romantic self-indulgence and as a vision of the destructive implications of a creative mind, it is no less certain that the authoress intended to point out the inevitability of such a fate for the visionary who disconnects himself from reality in order to pursue the fantasy of omnipotence. In my paper, I intend to link several psychoanalytical concepts – such as the uncanny or the theme of the double – to the development of Gothic fiction as a subgenre of Romanticism, while attempting a psychoanalytical re-reading of Victor Frankenstein’s actions and their terrible results.

Keywords: disavowal, psychoanalysis, Romanticism, Gothic, responsibility

Motto: “There is something at work in my soul, which I do not understand” (Shelley 18).

Introduction
In her “Making a Monster: an Introduction to Frankenstein” from The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley, Anne Mellor clearly explains why the 19th century authoress unquestionably engendered one of the most powerful myths of Romantic literature: “Frankenstein is our culture’s most penetrating literary analysis of the psychology of modern ‘scientific’ man, of the dangers inherent in scientific research, and of the horrifying but predictable consequences of an uncontrolled technological exploitation of nature and the female” (9).

Speaking of psychology and science, I have chosen as a motto for this paper a quote from the letter that ship captain Robert Walton writes to his sister, at the onset of his wondrous voyage to the North Pole. Besides pointing out the hidden workings in the spirit of man that are responsible for one’s destiny, Walton’s letter exposes a personality whose fated mate will be that of the scientist and dreamer Victor Frankenstein. The early craving in the captain’s heart is for a friend who would be a match for his fortitude and idealism:

I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me, whose eyes would reply to mine… I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve and amend my plans… I am too ardent in execution and too impatient of difficulties… and I greatly need a friend who would have sense enough not to despise me as romantic, and affection enough for me to endeavour to regulate my mind (Shelley 15-16).

Robert’s personality is the exact counterpart of Victor’s. They have the same mindset, arduous yet sensitive, and so they fall prey to the workings of fate in the same way (they get easily distracted...
from an ordinary successful life path by reading esoteric sources that plant into their souls the seeds of grand romantic endeavors, not meant for ordinary humankind), they persevere and falter in their paths, prone to disavow their chosen mission at the crucial point and have the tables of fate turned against them. Since Robert Walton’s misadventure is meant as a frame for Victor Frankenstein’s tragedy, it is but natural that the sea captain’s character be in fact a mirror for the soul of the doomed doctor: similar to Walton’s case, Frankenstein would have done well to look for a friend and collaborator when he had embarked upon the lurid task of building a new life-form out of cadaver parts. Additionally, the source of his tragedy is that he transmits this unconscious craving of his heart to the soul of the monster he is building and who, upon awakening into existence, desperately tries to bond to the human folk he observes timidly from a distance, but repeatedly fails to engage with. The monster’s ultimate request to his creator is therefore a commonsensical one, taken into account his circumstance: that Frankenstein should create a mate for it. And the scientist’s revulsion to and resolute rejection of this idea triggers their mutual catastrophe, an event that finally sucks in Robert Walton’s enterprise and purpose.

Analysis

I shall begin my demonstration of the reversed myth of creation by exposing the makings of Mary Shelley’s novel. Initially released in 1818, it is, historically speaking, perfectly integrated into the period designated as Romanticism in literature, roughly unfolding between 1780 and 1830. In the 1831 preface to the third (and standard) edition of the text, Mary Shelley attributed the genesis of her novel to a daydream she had of an “artist” bringing a creature to life, a deed whose achievement would have terrible consequences for himself and those close to him. In fact, the birth of the preeminent Gothic fiction of all times (until, at least, the publication of Dracula by Bram Stoker in 1897) originates within a literary contest that took place on the shores of Lake Geneva in 1816, when Mary Shelley, her husband – the poet Percy B. Shelley - and a few other companions, among whom Lord Byron, decide they would each tell a ghost story to the audience. That is why the action of the novel is situated in the Geneva region, as a tribute to the moment of its creation. Among the literary and mythical sources of inspiration, there figure prominently the legend of the Greek God Prometheus – thief of fire and maker of man, in some legends - but also Milton’s Paradise Lost, one of the most influential works preceding the Romantic era.1

Paradise Lost set the standard in matters of Romantic taste by promoting the sublime in landscape, with the transcendental imagery of mountains, seas or storms, and cultivating pervasive feelings of awe and terror, associated with the experience of vastness and silence. All these elements are to be found, as in a mirror, reproduced exactly (in a sort of pastiche style), in Mary Shelley’s remarkable fiction. Her novel also comes curiously close to the utopia/dystopia genre, representing a perfect life circumstance that is subverted early on and turned into the worst nightmare ever, for protagonist and reader alike2.

The critics of Frankenstein have noted how this novel welds discordant notions such as superstition and science, Gothic magic and rational enquiry, being a hybrid of sorts, and finally every bit as monstrous as the horrific creature it exposes. Besides the influence of Romanticism, owing to her poet husband, Mary Shelley was equally indebted to her parents, who were both revolutionary figures of their times. In fact, the novel is dedicated to her father – William Godwin, a rational-anarchist philosopher open to the ideals of the French Revolution – and also to her mother – Mary

1In this work, an epic retelling of the Genesis which also inspired Percy Shelley’s poem Prometheus Unbound, Satan’s prophetic dramatic persona represents the cultural and political outsider who boldly questions the status quo of morality and religion, thus becoming the hallmark figure for the Romantic rebels of the future.

2From this point of view, Mary Shelley’s prose is akin to Edgar Allen Poe’s, in the sense that it tempts the reader into endorsing the main character’s fantasy and then to sharing in his fate (giving at least one the opportunity to see what it would take to be in that character’s place).
Wollstonecraft, a prominent feminist of her time. They had both written works, which, in a way or another, influenced their daughter’s literary output and were bound to make it revolutionary in spirit, to say the least.

The moral of the story is quite simple, however, when told in the terms of the search for forbidden knowledge, which refers to a dangerous pursuit for perfection. The novel could be said to be dystopian, in the sense that it regards with ambivalence traditional religion, the Enlightenment ideals, as well as the theories of man-made redemption, expressing scepticism towards Christianity, as well as towards Rationalism and the Romantic notion of the genius, in science as well as in art. It seems that the unique family background of the writer conspired with the propitious time and place of the writing, to generate the thrilling prodigy of a novel which seems to share the attributes of the monstrosity it narrates about. And, just like Frankenstein’s monster, the novel prospered, traveling widely across time and space and enjoying a wild popularity, as its author desired.

There is one more circumstance that should be mentioned regarding its creation: Mary’s mother had died shortly after her birth (and so the author, like the novel’s hero, is an orphan); also, just one year before the idea of the story occurred to her, Mary Shelley had given birth to a child that had lived but two weeks (so the idea of reanimating a body can be more or less consciously connected to her trauma of loss). Although informed by biography, the novel has so many facets and has incorporated so many influences that an autobiographical reading would be limiting, nevertheless. It remains a mystery to its readers and critics alike and open to reinterpretation just like Shakespeare’s work will always be. But biography is important as a criterion for an era fascinated by the confusion in the mind and its dark recesses, before the advent of psychology. In fact, it is rather upon the groundings in Victor Frankenstein’s biography and on the psychoanalytical reading of his actions that I want to focus in the following lines.

The Freudian term ‘disavowal’ (in psychosis) refers to a splitting of the ego confronted by some distressing demand from the outer world – in contrast with ‘repression’ (in neurosis), where the demand comes from within. In general terms, the word implies a denial of knowledge, relationship, and/or responsibility towards something (or someone). Again, critics of Frankenstein agree that the case of the novel’s main character amounts to a hubris connected to the evasion of responsibility by an ardent humanitarian idealist – Victor Frankenstein – who animates a monster made out of body parts of human and animal origin, in the hope of creating a new race that would hail him as creator. Substituting himself to God, Victor cannot help being human and ultimately shuddering at the monstrosity of his own creation, which he abandons in fear and disgust. He is therefore smitten by the hand of Providence for his transgression, much as Prometheus had been for bringing heavenly fire to the human race. The monster Victor creates is quite innocent and benevolent in the beginning but turns evil and destructive when its repeated attempts to integrate with humanity unavoidably fail. It ultimately turns upon his creator, whose happiness he destroys by killing first his little brother and then his bride on their wedding night (since Victor repeatedly refuses to make a mate for the monster). The moody Romantic genius is thus destroyed by his own misdirected creation and one wonders indeed why Victor had to animate a monster instead of having a baby of his own or why, after creating the monster, did he not face the consequence of his deed, but totally disavowed the result of his strenuous scientific effort, refusing any connection to its obvious result.

According to Nicola Trott, the Romantic genius may oscillate between “frenzy and lassitude, intoxication and disgust” (Trott qtd. in Gilroy n.p.) with the object of his endeavors, because of the paradoxical nature of Romantic inspiration that separates cause and effect. But in psychoanalytical terms, the reason for disavowal may be located in the family background, being engendered by a faulty child-parent relationship. Indeed, as Victor Frankenstein reminisces of his childhood, he recounts that his relationship with his parents had been one of “object” of their affections, calling himself their “plaything”. Moreover, reading his confession, we find out that his parents’ relationship had been one of tutor and pupil (his mother being in fact “adopted” by his father, much younger than him and the child of a dear dead friend). Frankenstein’s bride, Elizabeth, is also an
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adopted child and his mother presents it to him one day as his present: “her promised gift” which he regarded as “mine to protect, love, cherish... as a possession of my own... my more than sister, since till death she was to be mine only” (Shelley 29). It is indeed quite obvious that, despite the idealized climate of love and benevolence, the bond of natural affection is quite weak in this adoptive family. However, what is ranking high in their internalized system of values is the repeatedly confirmed belief that they can decide the happy fate of others, who should in turn please their “owners” by serving and loving them faithfully. We are not surprised therefore that, when in this perfect world view, the monster makes his appearance (failing to confirm Victor’s expectations), he should abandon it as a dissatisfying possession, or like a broken toy, failing to integrate it in his perception of reality. Frankenstein, therefore, cannot acknowledge the dark matter of his spirit in the way that Shakespeare’s hero Prospero does in the end of The Tempest with Caliban, by proclaiming: “this thing of darkness I acknowledge mine” (n.p.). While Prospero was a wise sorcerer, Mary Shelley’s hero seems to be a frustrated individualist. The monster may then be interpreted as a projection of his creator’s aggression and repressed sexual drive, since his family hides the reality of desire under the guise of adoption. The split within the self, between the good and the bad object, is instantiated by the theme of the double in the novel, with Frankenstein and his monster mirroring each other, while continually exchanging sides as pursued/pursuer or master/slave. In fact, the posterity of the novel in popular culture does not even make a difference between them anymore, frequently calling the monster by the name of Frankenstein! Last but not least, the idealized family image triggers the appearance of monstrosity in their lives, as an instance of the Freudian “uncanny” – a dreadful thing arousing from the familiar, which is also a typical feature exploited by the Gothic genre, whose connection to the religious is quite subversive. The Gothic derives its energy from the excessive, improbable and the monstrous, seeking freedom from aesthetic restriction and defying moral convention. In theory, the Romantic notion of the Unity of Being may be achieved by overcoming the dualism between spirit and mind, though in the case of Mary Shelley’s hero, this amounts to self-extinction.

While the myth of creation speaks of an original inspiration out of which the whole world developed, in Mary Shelley’s Gothic thriller the spark of life ignited by the doomed scientist is the trigger of his world’s unravelling, plunging him from the euphoric heights of creationist elation to the depths of despair, within the blink of an eye. As Mellor argues, Mary Shelley was certainly ironic towards the Romantic notion of her husband, regarding the idealization of the male self (the underside of which was the repression of femininity):

Specifically, she takes issue with Percy Shelley’s notion (later articulated in the fragment “On Love”) that the lover imagines an idealized form of himself, then sets out to find its “antitype” in the world. That such a strategy pits women against a masculine ideal that is sublimely egotistical is only part of Mary Shelley’s point. For she also suggests that the lover’s idealizations represent a deep-seated fear of female sexual desire (13).

The coming into being of the Creature is the materialization of Frankenstein’s deepest-seated fears, his return of the repressed, the embodiment of “a Freudian text in reality”, according to Paul Sherwin (889). The critic whose article I am referring to here correctly pinpoints the source of Frankenstein’s primal repression and argues against the more simplistic (or misdirected because overcomplicated) Freudian readings of Mary Shelley’s text. I believe Sherwin is right in identifying the death of Frankenstein’s mother as the original impulse for the reanimation project, death being

3Andrew Michael Roberts discusses this circumstance as an instance of the fantasy of omnipotence, quite common in early childhood, when there is a belief that the world is created by and exists solely for our own happiness (see Nicholas Roe, Romanticism: An Oxford Guide).
4terms taken over from relational psychoanalysis
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likened to “an original anxiety of deprivation associated with the departure of the mother” which is deemed “a pre-eminently narcissistic insult for Frankenstein” (Sherwin 894), as much so as the impression made on him as a child by the bolt of lightning that consumes the massive oak-tree. Overtaken by primordial anxiety, Frankenstein realizes that death, in relation to life is “not an external agency but an internal component” (Sherwin 894) so that, in desiring and giving life, one inevitably ends by embracing death’s ice-cold body – an all-encompassing pessimism that equally explains Victor’s premonitory dream of Elizabeth turning into his dead mother, just after the Creature’s stirring to life.

For the main characters in this Gothic fiction (Frankenstein and the storyteller Walton), the quest they have embarked upon is deflected and they are ultimately left powerless to act along the path they have chosen. Their efforts tend towards exhaustion or disintegration, in keeping with the concept of Romantic inspiration that feeds upon the dying embers of a grand vision (according to Percy B. Shelley). Both Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton had embarked upon an adventure – one in the realm of medicine, the other as a Polar explorer – seeking to break new ground and seize the mysteries of creation: the scientist aims to create a new life-form that would call him master, while the explorer hopes to discover the heavenly paradise at the northernmost extremity of the globe. Even though they do not fail to keep track of their purpose, their dreams turn into nightmare, since both propose to exceed the limits of humanity. Their quest is self-centered and therefore circular, egotistic. They have no love for humanity, since the former seeks to engender a different race, while the latter quite literally leaves humankind behind. Ironically, in both cases, fate backlashes and destroys their hopes. Freudian psychoanalysis is therefore extremely fit to investigate the groundings of these crumbling edifices.

According to Paul Sherwin’s psychoanalytical re-reading of Frankenstein, the “uncannily fearful” creature is a representation of the primal repression or an embodiment of the sublime, which “disqualifies any attempt at integration” and prevents “the institution of a firm psychic apparatus” (886). The monster thus embodies “a progressively more enthralling superpower” and Frankenstein is ever more deeply subjugated by this dark double, joining “in the frenetic dance of death that impels these mutually fascinated antagonists across the waste places of earth” (Sherwin 886). To motivate the engendering of this horrific quest, Sherwin argues quite convincingly, that “there is a treacherous wishing-dreading circuit that links Elizabeth and the Creature” to Frankenstein’s dead mother, who is cast as “the central term of the triad” (887). The dream that discloses this connection happens right after the disastrous act of animation and reveals Frankenstein’s repressed desire for his dead mother (that Elizabeth evokes to him), which in turn engenders the fear and guilt represented by the Creature who simultaneously stands for “the accusatory phallic father… and the castrated self” (Sherwin 887):

I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets... Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but 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 of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror... every limb became convulsed: when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon... I beheld... 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. He might have spoken, but I did not hear, one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped (Shelley 56).

Waking from the terrible dream only to find the disgusting product of his creation standing at this bedside, Frankenstein wrongly assumes that the hand extended towards him was supposed to inflict death and flees in horror from it. Later on, he convinces himself (quite without ground, as it seems to the critic) that the Creature is only capable of inflicting evil, as a symbolic punishment sent upon
him from above ("I conceived the being in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me", 76). In fact, the creature slowly turns into what the world (especially Frankenstein) expects it to be. While in the beginning its utmost desire was to engage in a sympathetic relationship with another being, the monster, excluded from the human community, “begins to objectify the negativity he arouses in others”, so that we may recognize his aggression as “a by-product of disintegration, not an innate drive that has been cathartically unbound” (Poovey 337). Amidst manifold psychoanalytical interpretations of Frankenstein, Paul Sherwin insists that the utmost characteristic of the Creature is its “virtuality”, it being a representation of the uncertainty principle, perpetually prone to misreading, a thing that Frankenstein justly calls his “daemon”:

A marginal or boundary being, the daemon is a powerful representation of our uncertain lot, suspended as we are between knowledge and power, nature and supernature, objectivity and subjectivity. Conceiving the Creature as a genius of liminality, a type of art’s duplicitous interplay of revelation and concealment, restores his virtuality, which is betrayed as soon as he comes to signify something determinate (Sherwin 891).

What the critic here referred to pleads for is a broader explanation, still offered in terms of Freudian analysis, but avoiding narrowing-down or deterministic readings. He urges us to stay alert to the heterogeneity of meanings surrounding the Creature, invoking a close reading of it or “the need to look at something again and again until it begins to declare itself” (Sherwin 891). While for the doomed creator, the Creature may be a monster, for Frankenstein’s readers the monster could prove to be an enlightening parable for descending into the deep recesses of human nature.

Indeed, by following the critic’s train of thought, we are rewarded with the light of understanding. Going back to Shelley’s vision of creation that Sherwin himself invokes (“the mind in creation is as a fading coal”, 891), we can understand art and its final product as a betrayal of its original source of inspiration, which is of divine essence. The artistic product, however, is far from being divine, mediated as it is by the imperfect vision of human nature. A mere shadow on the wall in contrast to the flames that project it, human creation is ugly and frustrating, but mainly for its creator, since the public could in fact appreciate the result of artistic effort. However, for Victor Frankenstein, the artistic vision materializes not only in an imperfect creation, but it is one that reminds him of the haunting truth he cannot efface: his despair over the human condition consists in the fact that it is tainted by death, creation is a reminder of death, which in its turn is an internal component of life. This explains his dream of Elizabeth turning into the image of his dead mother, a dream he has right after animating the monster.

Sherwin posits the possibility of a “primal scene trauma” (893) for Frankenstein, one that may have triggered the solipsistic drive of his creation. The untimely death of his mother, coupled with the childhood scene in which he witnesses the destruction of the great oak-tree by a lightning bolt, constitutes an insult to his narcissism, generating an extreme anxiety of estrangement. This represents the starting point of his desire for disentangling life from death, for creating without the sin of conceiving, in other words this is the onset of his “restless drive for autonomy” (Sherwin 894): “I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation” (Shelley 45). But being a pioneer requires facing the world alone, and Frankenstein’s account of his embarking upon his quest suggests utmost loneliness as a sine-qua-non condition for the success of his dream: “I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit” (Shelley 52). His intent was to pursue nature to its innermost “hiding-places” which is akin to a violation of sacred limits, and seize upon the mystery of creation which is the ability of animation, which he eventually acquires. Yet, he does not stop at this. In his delighted frenzy he dreams of animating another human being and maybe even bringing back the dead. In her introductory study, Kate Mellor also observes that one can read Frankenstein’s fall as Nature’s revenge:
Waldman and Frankenstein share with early modern science the assumption that nature is only matter, particles that can be rearranged at the will of the scientist. They thus defy an earlier Renaissance world-view that perceived nature as a living organism, Dame Nature or Mother Earth, with whom humans were to live in a cooperative, mutually beneficial communion. Frankenstein thus opposes ecology with egotism, with his own yearning to command the worship only a God receives... But Victor’s scientific experiment, as the world knows by now, does not succeed. This is not merely because the creature turns on him, but also because “Mother Nature” fights back (19).

As Sherwin points out, the consequences of the character’s extreme isolation are self-loss coupled with self-aggrandizement (a mixture of narcissism and psychosis), so that Victor Frankenstein finally turns into the mad genius that can dream of substituting himself to God, but only until his creation is given life. At the moment of the Creature’s animation, Shelley’s theory of artistic inspiration is applied and the dream of heaven turns into a hellish vision: the Creature is sublime, therefore unrepresentable, its extreme ugliness being symbolic for its meaning – it is the embodiment of Death-in-Life. And so, we can understand how the satanic void created by the artistic need generates the myth of creation in reverse, where putting together is the same as dismembering (since the Creature is made out of fragments of corpses). At this point, it is worthwhile reminding ourselves that Mary Shelley intended her novel as a critique of the Romantic genius, representing estrangement from humanity (and from the path of God) as Hell itself, which is where her hero sinks at the very moment of fulfilling his purpose.

The monster’s existence points to another moral of Frankenstein’s story: his revolt against Death is so great that he separates himself from God and humanity, yet his worst punishment is not the failure of his project, but the fact that he is blinded to the ultimate necessity that a man of science should endorse - that of responsibility towards his deeds. Victor’s incapacity of dealing with and facing up to the challenge of his own creation, his flight in horror from the reality he had engendered is what brings about his downfall. What the creature protests and reacts against so violently is ultimately compassed by the novel’s motto (“Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay to mould me Man, did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me?” [Milton X]): the creator’s lack of response, his construing of the monster into an intolerable being (“an unspeakable artefact” [893], as Sherwin calls it), is in fact an instance of his lack of response-ability or the inability to respond in a humane, responsible way to the circumstances. Thus, the creature comes to symbolize “a token of loss, a complex representation of the estranged universe Frankenstein has summoned into being by pushing away reality” (Sherwin 893), confirming Mary Shelley’s character as “yet another Gothic hero-villain, a tiresome neurotic” that egotistically glories in his own doom (Sherwin 899).

Conclusions

To conclude, I would like briefly to recall some of Poovey’s arguments regarding Mary Shelley’s authorial intent, in an attempt to decode the ultimate source of the monster’s parable. According to the above-mentioned critic, the monster personifies “the psychological dimension of Frankenstein’s fall, the personal anguish that attends the egotist’s self-deception” (Poovey 337). However, what Mary Shelley asserts through her novelistic discourse is quite different from the profession that her husband, Percy B. Shelley, used to preach. For her, the Romantic model of the imagination is grounded in egotism (which is necessary for self-assertion) and this ends by stifling and ruling-out the “the self-denying energies of love” (Poovey 332) – therefore, she can be credited with “exploding” the very foundations of Romantic optimism: “Desire is for (Mary) Shelley a drive that can and must be regulated specifically, by the give-and-take of domestic relationships. If it is aroused and not controlled, it will project itself into the natural world, becoming voracious in its search for objects to conquer and consume” (Poovey 334).
The reason why the writer may have been thus inclined to feel falls not within the scope of our present discussion. Suffice it to say that Mary Shelley’s position was not an extremely comfortable one in her time, since she had to define her artistic persona as separate from her husband’s and yet he was her guide and councilor in artistic matters. She also had to account for her status as a woman in Victorian society, to uphold morality and family values, while attempting to define herself independently as an artist. Is there such a surprise that her inner self was struggling not to come apart, that it had to be made up – just like Frankenstein’s creature – from shreds and patches, to appear to deny its own nature while struggling to survive and break free from convenience? In writing and then editing Frankenstein’s story, Mary Shelley seems to have succeeded the nearly unachievable feat of both revealing and hiding her true self: speaking her mind while disguising her fears, dismantling yet simultaneously exulting over the concept of Romantic genius – in other words, endorsing disavowal at the same time with making excuses for it, inasmuch as the novel’s main agonist, Victor Frankenstein unconsciously did.
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