

The Romantic Form of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Author(s): Charles Schug

Source: *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1977), pp. 607-619

Published by: Rice University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/450311>

Accessed: 07-04-2020 15:08 UTC

## REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/450311?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/450311?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Rice University is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*

## The Romantic Form of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

CHARLES SCHUG

Although Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has begun to receive more critical attention now than it has in the past, and although two critics have recently examined its relationship to other Romantic literature, it has not been generally regarded as congruent *in form* with contemporary Romantic works. Robert Kiely does discuss it in company with contemporary novels in *The Romantic Novel in England* but he is interested less in scrutinizing its form than in demonstrating a "dissonance" between what he sees as its two dominant themes.<sup>1</sup> In his discussion, however, Kiely locates contradictory attitudes toward Frankenstein that, while they perhaps reflect Mary's own ambivalence toward Percy (pp. 156-158), raise an important critical question about the novel's true moral sympathies—is Frankenstein right or is the monster?<sup>2</sup>—a question we can best resolve, I suggest, by approaching *Frankenstein* in the way in which we would approach, for example, "Ode to a Nightingale." We need to examine the novel's form in the same manner that we would examine the form of such a Romantic poem.

Three ideas about Romantic literature that are especially relevant to the form of *Frankenstein* can be abstracted from the body of modern criticism of Romantic works of art. (1) Romantic literature necessitates the active participation of the reader, who must attend closely to the workings of the artist's (actually the persona's) mind as it shapes and controls the work of art. Romantic poetry involves, as Larry J. Swingle explains, a "restructuring of traditional conceptions about what poetry is supposed to offer a reader." It offers a combination of instruction and delight, but it "teaches by questioning the reader's answers. It guides by producing rather than relieving tension. It does not present the result of a quest, but instead forces the

<sup>1</sup>(Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p. 172. The two themes are the absolute need for friendship versus the right of the genius to work in solitude. Further references appear in the text. Those two recent critics are Larry J. Swingle, "Frankenstein's Monster and Its Romantic Relatives: Problems of Knowledge in English Romanticism," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 15 (1973), 51-66 and Richard J. Dunn, "Narrative Distance in *Frankenstein*," *Studies in the Novel*, 6 (1974), 408-417.

reader to experience the act of questing himself."<sup>2</sup> (2) The dominant idea of a Romantic work of art, as Robert Langbaum demonstrates, is the doctrine of experience—the “doctrine that the imaginative apprehension gained through immediate experience is primary and certain, whereas the analytic reflection that follows is secondary and problematical.”<sup>3</sup> (3) Romantic writers combined the ballad, which was primarily narrative, with the lyric and effected a “gradual transformation of simple narrative structure . . . into a discontinuous, non-narrative structure” that created “a self-satisfying inner order, a non-logical continuity;”<sup>4</sup> this new kind of form, the Romantic lyric, influenced other efforts by the Romantics as well.

As the last of these points implies, we need to approach *Frankenstein* through its most distinctive feature: its narrative structure. That structure—which employs three separate internal narrations, Walton’s in the letters to his sister and his journal, Frankenstein’s to Walton, and the monster’s to Frankenstein—might be described as a box within a box within a box or as a series of concentric circles. Perhaps the latter image is the better since the monster’s narrative at the very center of the novel acts as a kind of vortex<sup>5</sup> for the conflicts and dilemmas the novel embodies. As we shall see in a moment, it is the inclusion of the monster’s narrative, as much as any other feature of the novel, that forces us to read *Frankenstein* in the same manner as we would a Romantic poem.

Karl Kroeber makes a point in *Romantic Narrative Art* especially pertinent to our discussion here. He suggests that “Narrative as it appears in [Romantic] lyrics is an element of logical or rational organization; it implies a conception of experience as objectively

<sup>2</sup>“On Reading Romantic Poetry,” *PMLA*, 86 (Oct. 1971), 976. Further references appear in the text. The emphases of Swingle’s own examination of *Frankenstein* (in “Frankenstein’s Monster and Its Romantic Relatives”) are different from mine; he seeks to locate the novel within the Romantic movement by demonstrating that it treats the “problems of knowledge” in a manner similar to works by Percy Shelley, Keats, and Byron. But his conclusion supports my reading of the novel: “By means,” he says, “of multiple first-person narration, the balancing of unresolved conflicting claims to truth and justice, and ambiguous primary evidence, Mary Shelley prevents the reader from knowing the monster. By doing so, I believe, she heightens her novel’s significance, transforming it from a fairly simple moral tract into something approaching tragedy” (see “Frankenstein’s Monster and Its Romantic Relatives,” p. 55).

<sup>3</sup>*The Poetry of Experience* (1957; rpt. New York, 1963), p. 35. Further references appear in the text.

<sup>4</sup>Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art* (1960; rpt. Madison, 1966), pp. 51, 58. Further references appear in the text.

<sup>5</sup>J. Douglas Perry considers a structural vortex to be “the over-all gothic structure”; see “Gothic as Vortex: The Forms of Horror in Capote, Faulkner, and Styron,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 19, (1973), 154.

apprehendable: 'If I tell you what occurred you will know what happened to me.' But the experiences which are the sources of the poems' energy are purely subjective and creative; they cannot be told about; we must be made to participate in the poet's vision" (p. 58). Mary Shelley sets herself a task that she approaches in a way similar to that of the Romantic poets of whom Kroeber speaks: she tries to talk about—and thus to define, to set the boundaries of, to limit—what is essentially a purely subjective and creative experience and hence an ultimately indefinable, illimitable, objectively unfathomable experience, i.e., Frankenstein's creation of life and his subsequent struggle to cope with the consequences of this act. As Kiely notes, "If the phenomenon itself [i.e., the monster] cannot be named, neither can the feelings it evokes in its maker. No one can know what it is like to be the monster or its 'parent'" (p. 159). The complicated narrative structure of *Frankenstein* is necessary to keep the violent material of the novel—its moral experience—within bounds. Otherwise, the novel threatens to fly apart, to burst out of the bounds of its formal requirements altogether. The moral consequences of Frankenstein's actions are not containable; in fact, they eventually consume him.

Moreover, the novel's three narrators are in the same position that Shelley herself is in: each of the narrators confronts events from a particular vantage point and a limited perspective; each tries to force the listener into participation in his vision, just as Shelley seeks to force the reader into participation in hers; and each seeks to do internally in the novel what Shelley tries to do for the reader: to use narrative to establish a sense of order, of logic and rationality. Walton, Frankenstein, and the monster all pretend (in Kroeber's words), "If I tell you what occurred you will know what happened to me," but the real source of each narrator's vision of experience is purely subjective and creative and cannot be told about.

The similarity of the novel to a Romantic poem will be even clearer if we look at a passage from *The Poetry of Experience* in which Langbaum is speaking of "Frost at Midnight": "The meaning of the poem is in all that has accrued since the original vision, in the gain in perception. But the gain is rather in the intensity of understanding than in what is understood. . . . For here, as in *Tintern Abbey*, the revelation is not a formulated idea that dispels mystery, but a perception that advances in intensity to a deeper and wider, a more inclusive, mystery. The sudden advance in intensity gives a dynamic effect, a sense of movement, of the moving, stirring life of the mystery" (p. 46). Most of what Langbaum says of Coleridge's poem is true of *Frankenstein* as well; we can especially see the relevance if we look specifically at the monster's narrative and its function in the

novel. It works in the same way that the final vision of "Frost at Midnight" does. Although he purports to explain how he has become a homicidal fiend, the monster does not dispel any mysteries in his narration; rather, it is a revelation "that advances in intensity to a deeper and wider, a more inclusive, mystery."

The crux of the monster's defense of his actions is that while he was basically good to begin with the hostility of other people, and particularly of his creator, forced him to become evil; their rejection of him wrought a severe and hideous change in his nature. "I was benevolent and good," he says; "misery made me a fiend."<sup>6</sup> The monster's situation certainly appeals to the reader's sympathy, and the sympathy he gets is well deserved; but his narrative fails to convince nevertheless. First, no amount of misery can justify his murdering William and his framing of Justine, a totally innocent bystander. Second, the monster has himself told us of an exception to the bleak picture of human nature he offers in DeLacey, the blind man who remains kind and generous despite a life of considerable misfortune. The monster's explanation does not clear up the mystery of his actions: Frankenstein is right to distrust his motives. Far from settling any moral questions, the monster's narrative complicates Frankenstein's own moral dilemma as well as our task as readers.

Without the monster's narrative, the moral experience embodied in Frankenstein's fate, while still difficult and resistant to easy solution, is at least fairly simply defined: he must face up to the consequences of his attempt to usurp the power to create life; he has blundered frightfully, creating a soulless, heartless, homicidal monster whose repulsive exterior mirrors an inner evil and blackness, the natural result, one might conclude, of the tampering of a mere fallible human with divine prerogative.<sup>7</sup> With that narrative—the plangent cry of a sensitive, intelligent, morally aware, initially well-intentioned being who has suffered cruel rejection by his own creator as well as by those from whom he sought love—the moral problem Frankenstein faces

<sup>6</sup>Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Signet, 1965), pp. 95-96. This edition is based on the third London edition of 1831, and further references to it appear in the text. Although Shelley made extensive revisions for the third edition, they do not substantially affect my argument. She seems in the third edition to have reinforced the rigidity of Frankenstein's position; his self-judgments are on the whole more extreme in the third edition and tend to emphasize further the "doctrinal elements" of the novel.

<sup>7</sup>This is how the film versions of the twentieth century have tended to treat the story; occasionally a movie monster will make a human gesture but the viewer is never allowed to see from his point of view as the reader of the novel is. Christopher Isherwood's television version, "*Frankenstein: The True Story*" (1973), was unusual in that it presented the monster as sympathetic; unfortunately, it was in every other way a completely perverted version of the *true* story of Shelley's novel.

takes on almost limitless complexities; in the light of the monster's request for a female companion and threat of violence if his wish is not granted, there can be no thought that Frankenstein's problems will ever be manageably limited or even that they will ever be easily defined. Frankenstein's bizarre pursuit of the monster—bizarre in that the hunter cannot always be told from the hunted—is evidence enough of this point. What is more, the moral problem at the heart of Frankenstein's experience is not ended—that is, not limited—by death: for the reader, this moral experience goes on after Frankenstein's death, it continues after the novel stops. The power of the novel lies in this sense of an on-going moral experience.

The sense of an on-going moral experience in the novel demonstrates further its similarities to Romantic poetry. The ideas of responsibility and corrupted innocence are the central moral questions of the novel, what Larry Swingle would call its "doctrinal elements." Such a doctrinal element in a Romantic poem "functions as part of a piece of data, and works to create questions in our minds"; it functions "as a means of raising questions not only about itself but about matters beyond itself" (p. 975). Thus do the doctrinal elements of this novel function as well: the monster's narrative raises the question of Frankenstein's responsibility in a dramatic manner and forces us to question our own notions of moral responsibility. One result of the questioning which his narrative prompts, and which the structure of the novel makes unavoidable, is a disruption of the reader's equilibrium; this too is a feature of Romantic poetry. One "main movement" of Romantic poetry "is an attempt," says Swingle, "to disrupt a reader's equilibrium, to break down his sense of order and cast doubt upon the doctrines he holds when he comes to poetry. The effect is to gain a suspension of the reader's sense that the cosmos is well and solidly structured and that he has a good grasp of that structure" (p. 977). It would be hard to imagine a reader of *Frankenstein* whose sense that the cosmos is well or whose grasp of its structure was *not* threatened by this novel.

Both Swingle (p. 980) and Kroeber (p. 58) stress the reader's participation in Romantic poetry; the same participation is necessary in *Frankenstein*. But the nature of the reader's participation in a novel is bound to be quite different from his or her participation in a lyric poem. What happens in this instance is that the reader must in effect assume the role of the reliable narrator (to use terminology established by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*). No one consciousness within *Frankenstein* is really able to encompass the whole story or to measure its full import. The moral experience of the novel is immeasurable, but its effectiveness, despite its occasional

awkwardness or patches of poor writing, stems from the momentary power granted the reader to glimpse, to hold in mind, the unfathomable. This power belongs to readers of the novel because they make connections no individual narrator or consciousness within it is able to make. None of the three narrators of *Frankenstein* is reliable—that is, none speaks in accordance with the values of the implied author; the reader, turned into a fictional character by the narration within the narration,<sup>8</sup> becomes a kind of reliable narrator instead.

None of the novel's narrators represents the norms of the work; each is limited in his understanding of the others' experience and of the total import of the novel. Each narrator interprets his experience in moral terms yet each takes a strong moral position that is inadequate to encompass the experience of the other two. But the novel seems cast as a moral tale, a fact emphasized by Shelley in her additions to the third edition. In that edition Frankenstein ostensibly agrees to tell Walton his story in the first place so that the younger man will not make the same mistakes that he has: “. . . I imagine that you may deduce an apt moral from my tale, one that may direct you if you succeed in your undertaking and console you in case of failure” (p. 28). But note the ambiguous “I *imagine* that you” and the flexibility of the deduced moral that will serve not as a guide, a principle to live by, but as a rationalization of a completed event, functional whichever way Walton's fortune may go. Just as this “moral” is no moral at all—nor was meant to be—the other instances of conventional morality in the novel function only to create an illusion that the events narrated are subject to ordinary moral standards, some publicly agreed-upon system of values applicable to human behavior. As I have already suggested, this illusion is necessary to impose a sense of order required by the nature of the novel's subject matter, which might be too easily seen as blithering fantasy instead of a serious attempt, as Percy Shelley tells us in his 1817 Preface, to use the supernatural to afford “a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield” (p. xiii). Thus, because of the manner in which the novel is constructed, the real moral problem of *Frankenstein* is an experiential problem: it cannot be comprehended or even approached outside its embodiment in Frankenstein's, the

<sup>8</sup>See J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1968), p. 35, for a discussion of narration within narration.

monster's, and Walton's experiences; it cannot be apprehended outside the reader's direct experience of it.

If the reader is to become a "reliable narrator," then his or her experience must be consistent with the implied author's values. But if each of the novel's three narrators is unreliable, where are we to look for the norms of the work? How are we to determine what the implied author's values are? The answers to these questions are already at hand: since *Frankenstein* works like a Romantic poem it will have the same goal. The goal of a Romantic poem, according to Langbaum, is in part "to establish the reader's sympathetic relation to the poem, to give him 'facts from within': "For to give facts from within, to derive meaning that is from the poetic material itself rather than from an external standard of judgment, is the specifically romantic contribution to literature; while sympathy or projectiveness, what the Germans call *Einfühlung*, is the specifically romantic way of knowing" (pp. 78-79). Thus *Frankenstein*, like the particular kind of Romantic poem Langbaum wishes to trace, the dramatic monologue, will exploit "the effect created by the tension between sympathy and judgment" (p. 85); indeed, both Frankenstein's and the monster's narrations are themselves types of dramatic monologues. The norms of the novel, then, will be almost identical to the values a typical dramatic monologue embodies: "Arguments cannot make the case in the dramatic monologue but only passion, power, strength of will and intellect, just those existential virtues which are independent of logical and moral correctness and are therefore best made out through sympathy and when clearly separated from, even opposed to, the other virtues" (p. 86).

Now passion, power, and strength of will and intellect are precisely the virtues with which *Frankenstein* asks us to sympathize, but here's the rub: if both Frankenstein and the monster possess these virtues, and both do, with which character are we to sympathize? It cannot be both, since to sympathize with Frankenstein is to disbelieve, as he does, the sincerity of the monster's promise to exile himself with a newly-made bride far from human society, while to have sympathy for the monster is to brand Frankenstein heartless and cruel for his skeptical treatment of him—yet this is exactly what the novel asks us to do: sympathize with both characters. As Langbaum says of Cain and Faust: "Our only course is to build a new moral world with them, to see what they see and learn what they learn with as unreserved a sympathy as we give to Wordsworth in *Tintern Abbey* or *Resolution and Independence*" (p. 60). I think it is this paradoxical situation that has driven several critics, notably Richard Church, Muriel Spark, and Harold Bloom, to conclude that Frankenstein and the monster are in



some way two halves of the same being.<sup>9</sup> It would certainly help to resolve the paradox if we could interpret *Frankenstein* this way, but I do not believe the novel supports such a reading; we shall not so easily get round the problem.

It is an experiential problem we need to face directly. One might conclude that here is a flaw in the novel. For what Shelley has done is to offer competing claims on our sympathy. It is one thing to have only Frankenstein or only the monster to hold our undivided attention and sympathy, but another thing altogether to have to choose between Frankenstein and his creation. Yet if it is an aesthetic mistake to evoke strong sympathy for both Frankenstein and the monster but not offer unequivocal grounds for a final moral judgment of one character over the other, the mistake is entirely consistent with the values the novel argues for: sympathy, compassion, suspension of moral judgment, the need to value life and people as they are rather than as we would ideally like them to be—in short, the values that the dramatic monologue in particular and Romantic poetry in general seek to endorse. A common experience in Romantic poetry, as Larry Swingle says, is the author's "catch[ing] the reader up in open-ended questions and expanding possibilities" (p. 978). Such a catching the reader up is one result of the competing claims for sympathy embodied in *Frankenstein*.

If the reader is caught up in "open-ended questions and expanding possibilities" and if the poetry of experience is a "poetry constructed upon the deliberate disequilibrium between experience and idea, a poetry which makes its statement not as an idea but as an experience from which one or more ideas can be abstracted as problematical rationalizations" (Langbaum, pp. 35-36), so is *Frankenstein* constructed on such a disequilibrium between experience and idea as well. Any comment predicated on the notion that the novel makes its statement as an idea, such as this one by a recent critic, that *Frankenstein* is "an extended homily on the dangers of ambition,"<sup>10</sup> is bound to sound false. This critic has been led astray by what

<sup>9</sup>See Harold Bloom's "Afterword" to the Signet edition of *Frankenstein* (p. 213). As Bloom notes, Muriel Spark's antithesis between Frankenstein as the feelings and the monster as the intellect is not supported by the text; Bloom's own suggestion that the monster is a shadow or double of Frankenstein seems gratuitous. Their personalities and desires are distinct; what similarities there are do not require us to see the two characters as doubles. To read these characters as two halves of the same being or as doubles reduces Shelley's perceptions of human nature to simplistic terms; the subtle differences in their personalities give the novel its quality of moral complexity.

<sup>10</sup>William Walling, *Mary Shelley* (New York, 1972), p. 39. Walling cites for support M. A. Goldberg, "Moral and Myth in Mrs. Shelley's *Frankenstein*," *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 8 (Part I, 1959), 27-38.

Swingle calls the "doctrinal assumption"; the novel certainly exploits the experiential consequences of various characters' ambitions, but if we are to address ourselves to the question of ambition at all we must do so with full knowledge that we are confronting a problematical rationalization about each character's experience, not an explanation of it. As Swingle says: "Rather than raising questions in order to move toward a presentation of doctrine, Romantic poetry tends to do quite the opposite: it employs doctrine in order to generate an atmosphere of the open question" (p. 975). So too is an atmosphere of the open question generated in *Frankenstein* by the discussion of ambition. Moreover, to consider this novel a homily on anything is to accept at face value the idea that Frankenstein has a moral purpose in telling Walton his story; it is to ignore Frankenstein's plea that after his death Walton pursue and destroy the monster, a plea only half-heartedly retracted later; it is to ignore as well his equivocal final words, which undermine whatever moral force his advice might seem to have: "' 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'" (p. 206). If this be homily, heaven help the reader seeking spiritual edification.

Romanticism informs every aspect of the novel; as for the whole, so for its parts: the aesthetic properties of the novel itself are mirrored in the experiential problems that its characters face. The novel uses narrative as an element of logical and rational organization, and so does each of its narrators. The novel works the way a dramatic monologue does, and so do the "monologues" of Frankenstein and the monster and even, in a slightly different way, Walton's letters. The implied author of *Frankenstein* impresses us with a sense that the formulation of values is continuous, that we can never achieve a final formulation (this is the position of the Romanticist), and so is Frankenstein himself in the same situation: he recognizes that his pursuit of the monster is both futile and compulsory. It is futile because its ultimate aim is to achieve a finality that is impossible, since what he is chasing is not really his physical creation, the monster, but some solution to the terrible and monstrous moral questions that he has previously tried to avoid but which were merely exacerbated while the monster one by one murdered the people Frankenstein loved. It is compulsory because only through his pursuit will he be continuously forced to live up to the responsibility of formulation and reformulation of values. Frankenstein's final speech to Walton seems to sum up very neatly the moral dilemma he

faces—is he responsible to his own creature or to the rest of humanity?—but both his need to articulate again a position he has stated several times before and his tentatively proposed, tentatively withdrawn request that Walton continue where he has left off indicate his inability to reach a final formulation of what he calls his duty. The process of formulation goes on for Frankenstein right up to the moment of death:

“Think not, Walton, that in the last moments of my existence I feel that burning hatred and ardent desire of revenge I once expressed; but I feel myself justified in desiring the death of my adversary. During these last days I have been occupied in examining my past conduct; nor do I find it blamable. In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature and was bound towards him to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being. This was my duty, but there was another still paramount to that. My duties towards the beings of my own species had greater claims to my attention because they included a greater proportion of happiness or misery.”  
(pp. 205-206)

Walton may wish to take this at face value, but we cannot. In the first place, there is no way of knowing whether Frankenstein's “higher” duty would have been necessary at all had he met the requirements of his first duty towards his creation instead of being sickened and running away the moment the monster opened his eyes. In fact, as Ellen Moers points out, the emphasis of the novel “is not upon what precedes birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth.”<sup>11</sup> It is this trauma, his own as well as the monster's, that Frankenstein refuses to confront directly and honestly. In the second place, for all practical purposes Frankenstein has failed his second duty as well as his first: once the monster has eliminated all of the people Frankenstein held dear he is no longer a threat to “beings of [Frankenstein's] own species.” The monster chooses from the very beginning to wreak revenge on his creator, not humankind at large. Frankenstein's real duty was to William and Clerval and Elizabeth, not to his “species” in general. Moreover, it is astonishing that Frankenstein finds his past conduct blameless. Is his sin that in a fit of enthusiastic madness he created a rational creature or is it that in a fit of repulsion and irresponsibility

<sup>11</sup>“Female Gothic: The Monster's Mother,” *New York Review of Books*, March 21, 1974, p. 25. Cf. Kiely's discussion (pp. 164-166) of Frankenstein's “attempt to usurp the power of women.”

he abandoned that creature—ill-prepared though he was—to himself?

Frankenstein's inability to reach a conclusive stance toward the proper course of action, toward his own responsibility, is further illustrated by his request of Walton to finish what he has begun. First he renews his request: "When actuated by selfish and vicious motives, I asked you to undertake my unfinished work, and I renew this request now, when I am only induced by reason and virtue." Then immediately follows a retraction: "Yet I cannot ask you to renounce your country and friends to fulfill this task." But Frankenstein seems less concerned with the moral propriety of his request than with pragmatic considerations: ". . . and now that you are returning to England, you will have little chance of meeting with him." Having presented some of the facts, he backs away altogether, leaving Walton with the burden of the choice: "But consideration of these points, and the well balancing of what you may esteem your duties, I leave to you . . ." (p. 206). Luckily for Walton, the immediate arrival of the monster resolves the issue for him.

The larger issue, however, is not resolved for the reader, just as such larger issues are never "resolved" in Romantic poetry. "The major difficulty Romantic poetry presents to many readers," notes Swingle, "is its open-endedness. The poetry offers questions, exposes problems, uncovers data. It casts doubt upon supposed certainties, and it suggests possible new directions for thought. Romantic poetry stirs the mind—but then it leaves the mind in that uneasy condition" (p. 980). *Frankenstein* presents the same difficulty of open-endedness. The subsequent appearance of the monster after Frankenstein's death—an appearance in which the monster offers a kind of minor reprise of his earlier monologue at the center of the novel—reaffirms the dialectic and re-establishes his claims on our sympathy. For despite the omissions, misinterpretations, dodges, and incorrect evaluations in Frankenstein's deathbed speech, his position remains generally valid: the monster has performed cruel and inhuman deeds of violence and evil in murdering Frankenstein's friends and relatives, and we have no sure way of establishing the credibility Frankenstein refuses to grant him. Forewarned by Frankenstein, Walton is suspicious of the monster's "powers of eloquence and persuasion" (p. 209), but these powers, precisely those of a dramatic monologue, carry the day for the monster, at least as far as the reader's sympathy is concerned. By acknowledging the horror of his deeds, attributing them to a force beyond his control, and effectively rendering his own remorse and suffering ("He [Frankenstein] suffered not in the consummation of the deed. Oh! Not the ten-

thousandth portion of the anguish that was mine during the lingering detail of its execution. . . . My heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy, and when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred, it did not endure the violence of the change without torture such as you cannot even imagine" [p. 208]), the monster wins our sympathy even while denying that anyone could sympathize with him ("Yet I seek not a fellow feeling in my misery. No sympathy may I ever find" [p. 209]). Walton, who earlier had felt indignation "rekindled within me" at the monster's words, offers no final comment or assessment of the monster's remarks but merely describes his departure, "borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance," thus ending the novel.

But as I have said before, if this is the end it is not the conclusion. While the monster gains sympathy he does not establish unimpeachable credibility. If he "was the slave, not the master, of an impulse which I detested yet could not disobey" (p. 208) in his determined effort to destroy his creator, then perhaps Frankenstein was right in fearing for the safety of all humankind. Just as we sympathize with Frankenstein's motives for denying the monster's request while we acknowledge his guilt in failing to assure for his creature even a modicum of happiness and well-being, so do we sympathize with the monster's plight in being rejected by all whom he encounters while we condemn his revenge and distrust the sincerity of his motive. And there, inconclusively, the situation stands at the end of the novel. Or does it? *Frankenstein* is not after all so unlike "Ode to a Nightingale" in this respect. In a way the rings of narration impose a systolic action on the novel: we move from Walton's introductory letters to half of Frankenstein's story to the monster's narrative at the center, then back through the rest of Frankenstein's story to Walton's final letters, which contain a brief recapitulation of both Frankenstein's and the monster's monologues; the change back and forth from one narrative consciousness to another offers the reader an experience similar to the experience of moving through the vacillating moods and ideas of the persona of Keats's poem. In both cases, it is the total step forward in articulation and understanding that counts, the accrual of meaning and experience, the gain in perception—in this instance, for the reader to a greater extent than for any individual consciousness within the novel.

The vortical structure of the novel, the pattern imposed on it by the concentric narrations, might be considered (to use the words of Ernst Cassirer) the "configurations of particular content" that "reveal a certain temporal *gestalt*, a coming and going, a rhythmical being and

becoming."<sup>12</sup> This experience of rhythmical being and becoming is organic and creative in nature, and it depends for its effect on the establishment of an essentially non-logical continuity built up gradually one step upon the other. By her or his participation the reader creates the novel along with the implied author. Because of this creation through the reader's imaginative participation, commonly agreed-upon external standards are inapplicable to the novel. Indeed, given its extraordinary subject matter, one would be hard put to find appropriate external standards in the first place. Like "Ode to a Nightingale," like other Romantic works, *Frankenstein* creates its own moral priorities.

*Iowa State University*

<sup>12</sup>*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Manheim (1955; rpt. New Haven, 1970), II, 108.