



Creating *Frankenstein*

Jeremy Kessler

The standard *Frankenstein* done by Mary Shelley and her husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, between August 1816 and April 1817, work based on now-lost early versions of the story that Mary began in July 1816. In restoring the “original” *Frankenstein*, Charles E. Robinson—an English professor at the University of Delaware and author of several books about Lord Byron and both Shelleys—has performed a sort of surgery on the 1816-1817 draft. The first part of his book is a version that includes both Mary’s original work and Percy’s corrections. The second part of the book, the pages of which are of a differently-colored paper to mark the procedure, excises Percy’s additions and deletions, leaving a story which “takes us back as far as possible to the ‘original’ novel that Mary Shelley first drafted during that famous and rainy summer of 1816 in Geneva.” Just as there are as many versions of *Frankenstein* as there have been alterations to its text, any one

centuries was the third published version of the novel. *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* first appeared as an anonymous three-volume work on New Year’s Day, 1818, in a run of five hundred copies. In 1823, Mary Shelley’s father Charles Godwin published another small run, also in three volumes, with minor changes made by Godwin or the publisher. The third version appeared on Halloween 1831 as a one-volume work which Mary Shelley herself had substantially revised.

In recent years, the 1818 version has returned to popularity among both scholars and publishers. But a new edition, calling itself *The Original Frankenstein*, goes still further back in the bibliographic record, presenting two fresh versions of the novel based on a draft manuscript that antedates the 1818 version. This manuscript is a product of work

The Original Frankenstein
By Mary Shelley (with Percy Bysshe Shelley)
Edited by Charles E. Robinson
Vintage ~ 2009 ~ 464 pp.
\$14 (paper)

Frankenstein: A Cultural History
By Susan Tyler Hitchcock
W. W. Norton ~ 2007 ~ 400 pp.
\$25.95 (cloth)

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version is a collection of fragments—not only of Mary and Percy’s various contributions, but of what Claude Lévi-Strauss called *bricolage*: the cobbling together of a new story or symbol out of cultural hand-me-downs. This process of piecemeal creation also characterizes the manufacture of Frankenstein’s creature. Book and monster are each man-made, bearing the marks of a human subjectivity wrestling with the constraints of the world around it—bending the world to its will. It may be that this contest between interior vision and exterior medium always results in a kind of fractured genesis, a creature whose seams must show. Mary Shelley herself appreciated the analogy between book and monster. When the substantially-revised third edition was released on Halloween 1831, she remarked: “And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days.”

In the first chapter of *Frankenstein: A Cultural History*, Susan Tyler Hitchcock—author of *Mad Mary Lamb: Lunacy and Murder in London* (2005) and the blog *Monster Sightings*—recounts the story of these happy days, when a group of young artists and lovers took shelter from the pounding Swiss rain in the summer of 1816, and pondered the wonders and horrors of nature. Two years earlier, Mary Godwin had met Percy Bysshe Shelley, fallen in love,

and borne his child out of wedlock. (The baby was premature and did not survive.) Percy was still married to his first wife Harriet; scandal ensued. The rebellious couple eventually fled to the Continent with Mary’s step-sister Claire, who herself was pursuing another poet, Lord Byron. In May 1816, the lovestruck threesome arrived in Geneva, where the already infamous Byron was summering at a lakeshore chateau once frequented by John Milton.

Despite the unseasonably cool, damp weather, the lakeside community was abuzz. As Percy Shelley recalled to a friend, “The inhabitants on the banks of the lake opposite Lord Byron’s house used telescopes to spy upon his movements.” These voyeurs were not just driven by simple curiosity: “They said that we had formed a pact to outrage all that is regarded as most sacred in human society.” The group’s entertainments appear to have been more staid than the neighbors cared to imagine. Conversation revolved around such happy bourgeois subjects as scientific progress, and evenings were occupied with ghost stories.

As the rain came down, Lord Byron and Percy Shelley discussed “the nature of the principle of life” and other “philosophical doctrines.” Conversations about “galvanism” left a deep impression on Mary; electricity was a hot topic. Less than twenty years before, Luigi Galvani had shot animals through with an electrical

charge, causing “disembodied frog leg muscles to move.” Galvani’s nephew Giovanni Aldini—a strikingly modern combination of magician, camp evangelist, and buzzworthy rock star—toured Europe, animating the tongues and eyes of ox-heads. Aldini’s most memorable trick was the pseudo-resurrection of a killer—a sort of reverse execution. A London jury had found George Forster (or Foster) guilty of drowning his wife and son in Paddington Canal, and he was hanged on January 18, 1803. A few days later, Forster’s body was taken to a nearby house, where Aldini “connected wires from a massive battery of copper and zinc to the corpse’s head and anus.” An eyewitness to the experiment recounted:

On the first application of the process to the face, the jaws of the deceased criminal began to quiver, the adjoining muscles were horribly contorted, and one eye was actually opened. In the subsequent part of the process, the right hand was raised and clenched, and the legs and thighs were set in motion. It appeared to the uninformed part of the by-standers as if the wretched man was on the eve of being restored to life.

A contemporaneous record of executions reported that “Mr. Pass, the beadle of the Surgeons’ Company, having been officially present during this experiment, was so alarmed, that he died soon after his return home

of the fright.” Though the periodical assured readers that in this particular case full revivification was impossible, it did note that in “cases of drowning or suffocation” Aldini’s method “promises to be of the utmost use, by reviving the action of the lungs, and thereby rekindling the expiring spark of vitality.”

At eighteen, Mary Godwin’s vision was already darkened by the inconstant light of life. Her mother had died in giving birth to her, and the year before her trip to Geneva, Mary described her own prematurely-born daughter as “unexpectedly alive, but still not expected to live.” “Animal electricity” or “galvanic fluid,” the vital substance posited as the source of organic movement and upon which experiments like Aldini’s were said to act, spurred her imagination: “Perhaps the component parts of a creature,” she mused, “might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth.” If modern medicine had not yet resolved the indeterminacy of a child’s birth, modern physics offered to unfang the frailty of life. Man might master death not through the preservation of life but through its re-creation.

The new science that drove Mary’s musings surely attracted the sensibilities of the group of young fantasists at Geneva as much for its aesthetic possibilities as its biological ones. Experiments such as Aldini’s had the same jagged contours that the

Romantics saw in the sublimity of nature—its deadliness to the human and its expressiveness of man's most potent inner life. This dark doubleness was manifested in the image that appeared to Mary one sleepless night:

I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world.

One of the more important stories Hitchcock tells in her *Cultural History* is the evolution of Frankenstein from a somewhat befuddled and conscience-stricken experimentalist to the now-familiar image of a wild-eyed Babel-builder, featured in countless moralistic retellings of the tale. As Hitchcock shows, Mary Shelley did not originally pen a story to condemn the excesses of human creativity and ambition. Six years before Victoria's coronation, Shelley's 1831 rewrite reflected changing public mores—the hubris of the creator is played up and the potential goodness of his creation played down.

But not simply public mores: the later version of the tale may also

reflect Shelley's own perspective changing with age, as many of the Romantics became more conservative as the years passed. Mary, Percy, and their friends were all student-aged or not much older at the time of their ghost-story summer, just like the figure in Mary's vision. Their youth is too little remarked upon by Hitchcock. Sitting around the chateau, conjuring spooks, arguing about the origins of life, creating life in the upstairs bedrooms—thus they filled their protracted, sophomoric days. Just as much as Frankenstein, they, artists all, were after new creations.

Still, the earlier *Frankenstein* does contain the anxieties about human creators and their creations that would come to characterize the modern era's mad scientist story. Mad science is a modern satire of reason. In the mad scientist, Western culture watches the paragon of rationality grow drunk on its own technical prowess. But the mad scientist is not a wholly novel figure: as *Frankenstein* and its own creation story suggests, the mad scientist is an updated avatar of the classic enemy of reason: the poet, that creator of new worlds who rejects any limit not set by his own will.

While Victor Frankenstein allowed Mary Shelley to explore the problem of the human creator, whether scientist or poet, his monster exemplified the experience of being created; of being alienated from one's origins in

wild accident or imperious design; of being composite, a thing with no sure center. We humans, creatures ourselves, come to empathize with the monster's plight: we too feel that what constitutes us is not *of* us, that what we are came from outside of ourselves. Whether we are built from dust in God's own image, or are a momentary pause in the evolution of multicellular life, there looms the knowledge that foreign material is at the very center of our existence. We are not self-fashioned and do not have mastery of our beings.

Both *The Original Frankenstein* and *Frankenstein: A Cultural History* demonstrate the problem of the created through an examination of how Mary Shelley's novel has changed over time, both during its own fraught creation and in the way its story has been received and modified through the years. First published anonymously, the novel has long been dogged by one of those literary whodunnits: the persistent belief, in some circles, that Percy was the primary—even sole—author. Robinson's scholarship makes a strong case against this idea, scrupulously detailing the collaboration between Mary and Percy, a collaboration which preceded our first available draft of the novel:

A comparison of the two versions...shows that Percy deleted many words in the extant Draft

and that he also added nearly 3,000 words to the text of the novel. When we add to these interventions the changes that Percy most certainly made in the two missing sections of the Draft, the changes he made at the end of the Fair Copy, and the one extended passage he likely made in the proofs, we may conclude that he contributed at least 4,000 to 5,000 words to this 72,000-word novel.

Percy's "corrections" are almost always on the side of the florid and Latinate. Where Mary's original Victor Frankenstein "had plenty of leisure," Percy's amount was "sufficient." To Percy's ear, Victor shouldn't "go to the university," he should "become a student" there. Almost two decades after William Wordsworth extolled the poetry of naturalistic speech, Percy changes his wife's "peculiarly interesting" to "almost as imposing & interesting as truth." Just as the true author of the book was for years kept anonymous for the sake of propriety, the "voice" of the nascent *Frankenstein* was thrown—its characters would speak in an archer prose style than first imagined, more familiar to the literary market of the day, if less true to life.

Hitchcock's lush history of *Frankenstein's* reception charts how convention shaped the "original" if already composite vision, following the transmigration of the monster story from book to stage to screen,

big and then small. Environmental influence exerts a strong grip on the story and on the natures of its characters. If the steamy lake-house where the novel was conceived produced a fraught, ambiguous work, the bustle of a metropolis called forth different qualities. In the summer of 1823, the play *Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein* opened in London, the first dramatic adaptation of Shelley's tale. As its title indicates, the play traded on a didacticism alien to the early versions of the novel. Tellingly, *Presumption* began a tradition that extends to the present day in rendering Frankenstein's creation mute. The emphasis thus shifts to the sin committed—the presumptuous fall—rather than on the ongoing struggle of creation, as witnessed by a dialogue between creator and created. The Gnosticism of the Romantics is repossessed by a more familiar apologetic.

Similarly, in James Whale's famous 1931 film adaptation starring Boris Karloff, a mute creature's evil is traced to the substrate of his consciousness: he has mistakenly been given the brain of a criminal. This literalization of contemporary psychological explanations for the source of sin was and remains a comfort to audiences. Surely, *our* brains are not "mismatched." How could they be? And yet time and again, when we betray ourselves, or when we feel not right for our bodies, this experience of impure creation returns.

Frankenstein's monster himself argued that his violence was a product of external forces, though of a social and not a biological kind:

I am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? You, my creator, would tear me to pieces and triumph. Remember that—and tell me why I should pity man more than he pities me. You would not call it murder if you precipitated me into one of those ice rifts and destroyed my frame, the work of your own hand. Shall I respect 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.

Made of parts of many men, the monster is the unhappy product of inexorable nature *and* nurture, his very heart a collection of the emotions that have been directed at him throughout his strange life. Our modern debate between nature and nurture—as if they are the only alternatives—reveals an essential pessimism: both are forms of determinism, both denying the freedom of true self-composition.

In the end, the problem of the creator and the created are united. The human creator himself creates in

part to dispel the terror of his being created. Herman Melville, one of the many nineteenth century writers influenced by Shelley's tale, powerfully felt the union of these problems. Hitchcock astutely flags Melville's homage in Chapter 44 of *Moby-Dick*, when Ahab storms out of his cabin in a strange fit:

For, at such times, crazy Ahab, the scheming, unappeasably steadfast hunter of the White Whale; this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, was not the agent that so caused him to burst from it in horror again. The latter was the eternal, living principle or soul in him; and in sleep, being for the time dissociated from the characterizing mind, which at other times employed it for its outer vehicle or agent, it spontaneously sought escape from the scorching contiguity of the frantic thing, of which, for the time, it was no longer an integral. But as the mind does not exist unless leagued with the soul, therefore it must have been that, in Ahab's case, yielding up all his thoughts and fancies to his one supreme purpose; that purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own. Nay, could grimly live and burn, while the common vitality to which it was conjoined, fled horror-stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth. Therefore, the tormented spirit that

glared out of bodily eyes, when what seemed Ahab rushed from his room, was for the time but a vacated thing, a formless somnambulistic being, a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself. God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates.

Ahab displays the classic divided consciousness of the created being—there are parts of him that he does not experience as being his own. There are states he enters which are beyond his will. There is a vulture inside of him that is beyond him. And yet, as Melville devastatingly catalogues, Ahab has created this vulture, a symbol of his createdness, through his own war against creation. Ahab, like the greatest of the poets, has constructed a world—a ship, a journey, an inimical fiend—as an alternative to the contingency of his own mortal life. But it is this wild act of creation, this magnificent, obsessive tale, that confirms his createdness, and propagates his dependence. The desire to be uncreated is the ultimate mark of the creature. It is through subsidiary creations that the creature tries to fulfill this desire: If I am the creator, perhaps I eclipse the limits of creation.

The proliferation of new worlds undermines our certainty in the one

external social or natural world. The gambit of art is to multiply worlds to such an extent that no single reality can exert enough force upon us to master us. At the same time, as Hitchcock's history shows, poetic creation at its most eccentric is quickly rewoven into the cloth of convention. Just like any other creature, an artistic creation does not control its own destiny.

Nearly two hundred years after its first publication, *Frankenstein* serves as an engine for the constant exposure of this process of world-making and world-conforming. Because the novel's subject matter was so ripe for popular consumption to begin with, showmen have been invested in conforming the tale to still more conventional narratives. The seams in the narratives show, and by revisiting these monsters, we remind ourselves about the perennial problems of the creator and the created.

Mary Shelley conceived of *Frankenstein* at a time when science, the

modern representative of reason, was moving toward world-making and away from its traditional world-representing role. The more powerful applied reason became, the more creative became the rationalists' work. Dr. Frankenstein marks the moment when the work of reason threatened itself with success. Mary Shelley's novel stands as a living critique of pure reason, in which the very *power* of human reason undermines its claim to address a single reality, unchanged by the manipulations of individual consciousness. In its Romantic fervor, *Frankenstein* announces a new stage in the very old history of creation, a paradoxical stage we still stride, where growing anxieties about determinism accompany growing suspicions that human subjectivity, whether exercised by poet or scientist, is the sole determinant of reality.

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