

THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

Trillium

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Source: *The Threepenny Review*, No. 49 (Spring, 1992), p. 19

Published by: [Threepenny Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4384076>

Accessed: 22/06/2014 04:01

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gave rise to Benjamin Franklin the colonizer, the civilizer. "The soul of man is a dark vast forest, with wild life in it. Think of Benjamin fencing it off!" is how Lawrence puts it, and a little later he quotes with horror Franklin's complacent remark about the American Indians: "if it be the design of Providence to extirpate these savages in order to make room for the cultivators of the earth..." Mary Shelley, too, was concerned with this sort of ruthless mastery—the sort exhibited not only by fanatical scientists, but also by all-powerful rulers toward the native inhabitants of colonized territories. She explicitly links the two in a passage where Victor Frankenstein is reflecting on his own obsessive pursuit of science and his corresponding neglect of his family. Frankenstein advises us that "if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquillity of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved, Caesar would have spared his country, America would have been discovered more gradually, and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed." For Mary Shelley, as for D.H. Lawrence, the scientist, the explorer, and the empire-builder all share the same potentially destructive zeal.

IT IS A zeal from which she, as an artist, is not at all exempt. Consider her metaphor about the writers of genius who "turn to the human heart as the undiscovered country" and "leave no lurking thought or disguised feeling in the hiding places." For Mary Shelley, the desire to control her world through the authority of authorship was constantly at war with her knowledge that such control was dangerous and sometimes self-defeating. *Frankenstein* is, among other things, an exploration of this problem: the problem of an author's relationship to her creation, her book. Mary Shelley makes this explicit when, at the end of the 1831 preface, she describes the novel as her "hideous progeny," acknowledging that *Frankenstein* is the monster she has fearfully but affectionately animated. Like Frankenstein's creature, Mary Shelley's novel wears the signs of its unique origins: its awkward movements and rough seams are the symbols of its miraculous birth. Like the monster, it is lovable for its eloquence, but also for its repulsiveness, for only in the latter can we see reflected our most carefully hidden fears. To write this novel was both an act of enormous hubris and a submission to forces beyond the author's control. "I busied myself to think of a story," she tells us in the preface; "I had thought of a story," she says after her crucial dream. But in between these two comments, in which her italics willfully stress the element of will, Mary Shelley describes to us the dream origins of her story, the circumstances whereby her "imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me."

Unlike Victor Frankenstein, Mary Shelley is a relatively loving parent: she feels affection not only for her novel, but for the monster who is its hideous progeny. She also stimulates in us, the readers, a comparable affection for him, and she makes this kind of affection, this kind of sympathy, a crucial point of the novel. How *Frankenstein* works on our readerly sympathies is not a technical adjunct of the novel's meaning; it is its meaning. Through the

feelings created in us by the manipulation of language (the monster's language, in particular, but also other people's), we arrive at moral judgments about the reasonableness of various characters' behavior, which we in turn generalize into moral principles. All novels work this way to some extent, but in Mary Shelley's case the enterprise is central to both the plot of *Frankenstein* and its structure.

Anticipating later writers like Emily Bronte, Wilkie Collins, and Joseph Conrad, Mary Shelley elaborated a complex technique of narrative frames and multiple viewpoints. The structure of *Frankenstein* is not linear, but circular: we bore our way into the "heart of darkness" (which is also the heart of feeling, of sympathy) and then come back out again. We begin with letters from the explorer Walton, who then gives us the narrative of Victor Frankenstein, who in turn gives way to the monster's own telling of his tale. After the monster's speech (which takes up most of Volume Two in the original three-volume edition), we then come back out to Frankenstein, and thence to Walton. In story-telling terms, this technique has wonderful advantages: it allows us to get a central character's firsthand, eyewitness account, and at the same time permits us to learn about his death (as we can't normally do in a first-person narrative, where the tale dies before the teller). In emotional terms, the method plays complicatedly with our capacities for sympathy, as each new character seems first a fearful stranger, then our closest intimate. (This is particularly true of the monster, who is utterly obscure to us in Frankenstein's account, utterly appealing in his own.) And in philosophical or moral terms, the use of multiple narratives is itself a commentary on the complex nature of truth. In *Frankenstein*, there are no given facts; everything we are told is a function of someone or other's viewpoint. This applies even to the monster's death or disappearance at the end. Walton, watching from the cabin of his ship, tells us that the creature "was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance." But this doesn't literally mean he was lost at sea; it simply means that Walton lost sight of him.

The doubtfulness of all the information we receive in *Frankenstein* is set against the pressure on us to respond to the characters emotionally. This is a novel which, heightening our emotions through the portrayal of horrific or catastrophic events, asks us to feel strongly. (It is, after all, a variation on the Gothic novel, a near descendant of such late-eighteenth-century works as Mrs. Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk*, Charles Brockton Brown's *Wieland*, and Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, all of which shamelessly sought to terrorize their readers.) At the same time, *Frankenstein* asks us to question all the sources of those strong feelings. Sympathy and antipathy are our crucial responses in this as in every novel; yet *Frankenstein* tells us that our sympathies, our antipathies, can be wrong. This applies massively to the monster himself (who is rejected instantly, by everybody, purely because of his "hideous" appearance), but it also applies to other characters in the novel, as if to show that not just

monsters suffer from this unfair fate. Walton, for instance, describes in an early letter to his sister the extremely noble, kind, self-sacrificing Russian who serves as his ship's master, but then adds that "he is silent as a Turk, and a kind of ignorant carelessness attends him, which, while it renders his conduct the more astonishing, detracts from the interest and sympathy which otherwise he would command." The monster's history is only the most extreme example of the way we tend to allocate our sympathies on the basis of nice manners and superficial appearances rather than essential moral worth.

Lost to Walton's sight he may have

been, but Frankenstein's creature reappears to us with frequent regularity, in numerous different forms—from the first theatrical adaptation in 1823 (which Mary Shelley attended and enjoyed) to the dozens of film and television versions, both serious and parodic, in our own century. As that century hurtles to its terrifying close—amidst toxic spills, nuclear threats, devastating climatic changes, angry homeless people, ineducable crack babies, starving war victims, and all the other catastrophes we have come to take for granted—it might help us to recall, with Mary Shelley's help, that we make our own monsters. □

Trillium

When I woke up I was in a forest. The dark seemed natural, the sky through the pine trees thick with many lights.

I knew nothing; I could do nothing but see. And as I watched, all the lights of heaven faded to make a single thing, a fire burning through the cool firs. Then it wasn't possible any longer to stare at heaven and not be destroyed.

Are there souls that need death's presence, as I require protection? I think if I speak long enough I will answer that question, I will see whatever they see, a ladder reaching through the firs, whatever calls them to exchange their lives—

Think what I understand already. I woke up ignorant in a forest; only a moment ago, I didn't know my voice if one were given me would be so full of grief, my sentences like cries strung together. I didn't even know I felt grief until that word came, until I felt rain streaming from me.

The Red Poppy

The great thing is not having a mind. Feelings: oh, I have those; they govern me. I have a lord in heaven called the sun, and open for him, showing him the fire of my own heart, fire like his presence. What could such glory be if not a heart? Oh my brothers and sisters, were you like me once, long ago, before you were human? Did you permit yourselves to open once, who would never open again? Because in truth I am speaking now the way you do. I speak because I am shattered.

—Louise Glück