BOOK REVIEW

Charles E. Robinson, Ed. The Original Frankenstein.
New York: Vintage, 2009.

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As with the seemingly inexhaustible supply of film adaptations of Frankenstein, just when you think the last word has been said on this fascinating novel, year after year its malleable text has provided a succession of critics with perspectives never entertained before and in the process continually enlarged the frames of reference the novel can support. But, all this time, at least we thought that, however malleable it might be, we knew what constituted the text upon which so many critics practiced their ingenuity. As problematic as it has always been to have to shuffle between the 1818 first and 1831 third editions (with major alterations in the latter required by its publisher Richard Bentley so as to secure a new copyright), Charles Robinson greatly complicates the process here, providing not one but two earlier texts derived from what remains of the manuscript. His 1996 facsimile edition in two volumes for Garland, with its immensely learned introduction and notes, still may provide the last word on such matters as the time line for the novel’s creation, but it presented the text as it stood in the manuscript with the clearly identifiable hands of Mary Godwin and her lover Percy Bysshe Shelley both discernible. Anyone wanting to differentiate what those hands were separately writing, however, had some concerted labor to expend. Robinson’s next step, in this printing, is the logical answer to that difficulty: to recover both Mary’s separate ur-text and the text as it would have appeared if Percy’s emendations (plus occasionally Mary’s further tinkering with those suggestions) had come to be the actual last words of the text. It is fair to say that every person who teaches this novel—which has been said to be the single most often-taught work of fiction in the English-speaking world—and
not a few of its students as well will want to consult Robinson’s diplomatic renderings of these two separate texts. As addenda to the actual printed texts, they shed rare illumination on the creative process at work, and in the very particular circumstances of its time and culture.

Let us look at this latter dimension further. Authors of the Romantic period, like those of the eighteenth century in general, expected collaborative input on their texts, usually from the publisher and even the printer. Matters like punctuation could vary enormously depending on either house style or the customary practices of a printing house or even a single printer within that concern. Often the “pointing” was largely left to be done definitively until a text went to press. If an author could not be present, an intermediary was often appointed, as Byron had Shelley convey the manuscript of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Canto III, written along with the beginning of *Frankenstein* during the famous Geneva summer of 1816, to John Murray’s publishing house in London and generally look to its accurate rendition. Later, in Italy, Shelley would similarly depend on his friend, the poet and novelist Thomas Love Peacock, to shepherd his work through the London press. Furthermore, though it is easy to equate the Romantic author with the mythic figure of the solitary genius, texts were often shared, sometimes with multiple confidants, for comment and even suggested improvement. With the two young and ambitious authors involved in this particular case, moreover, we confront something virtually new on the literary stage. I say “virtually,” because Mary and Percy adopted the short-lived literary collaborative model of her parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, cut short with Wollstonecraft’s death of placental poisoning shortly after her daughter’s birth; and during the eight years they lived together they created a form of partnership that, except for her parents, has no precedent among earlier writers in English. It is clear, for instance, that among Mary’s influences in this sponge-like work was the obsessive wandering of the self-absorbed hero of Shelley’s “Alastor”; yet, on the other hand, when Mary’s Creature in the penultimate paragraph of the novel foresees consuming his existence by fire at the north pole, he charts the course that Percy’s Count Cenci plots for himself on the Roman campagna in the fourth act of *The Cenci*. This kind of
cross-fertilization can be followed through the day-to-day creative endeavors of both husband and wife. Furthermore, though Mary, writing *Frankenstein* as an adolescent, has often been presumed to be a novice, she grew up in a distinctly literary household and published her first story at the age of ten. She could and, indeed, did demonstrably hold her own with her more experienced partner. And one should add that with the dedication of the novel to her father, she revealed to prescient readers an intellectual engagement with his entire fictional corpus as well as openly invited an attack from reactionary critics who knew the elements of a “Godwinian” novel when they saw one.

To this reader at least, what is most welcome about Robinson’s edition here is that it simply turns the page on an earlier, facile debate over the novel’s authorship. *Frankenstein* is manifestly not written by Percy Bysshe Shelley, though his suggested phrasing, where it is (infrequently) offered, is often adopted by Mary, though as noted above, with her own further shifts in diction showing that she is responding independently to Percy’s own responsiveness. The other side of that old debate was that, rather than being empowered by the writings and influence of her father and lover, Mary was overpowered by them. A careful reading of her draft against the first edition’s text powerfully argues against this reductive version of the history of the novel’s creation. The extraordinary intertextuality of the novel, not just in reframing the concerns of her father and her partner, but in its allusiveness to contemporary and earlier writers, is conclusively demonstrated to be her work. When Victor leaves for Ingolstadt he thus gives up the “old familiar faces” he is accustomed to (Lamb); when he escapes the scene of his creation he fears a phantom pursuing him (Coleridge); when he nears Geneva he is momentarily reinvigorated by the sight of the Alps, the “palaces of Nature” (Byron, from the as yet unpublished *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, III); as he climbs to the Sea of Ice below Mt. Blanc he quotes eight lines from Shelley’s “Mutability,” only recently published in the *Alastor* volume. Moreover, the Creature’s reading list, and particularly the complex ways in which *Paradise Lost* resonates throughout the novel, are Mary’s inspired invention. She may have been nineteen years old when she began writing, but she is Exhibit A of what it was like to be home-schooled in the Godwin household.
This young woman is remarkably attuned to a large repertory of actively living literature, which she assimilates and refashions with both accurate knowledge and artistic skill.

What Percy Shelley’s intrusions commonly add to her draft are minor aspects of context. The opening of the original Chapter 11, where Victor returns to Geneva, provides an example, Percy’s additions being shown, as Robinson does throughout the combined text, in italics: “Night had closed in when I arrived: the gates of Geneva were already shut; and I determined to remain that night at Secheron, a village half a league to the eastward of the city.” If to the experienced reader of this novel that doesn’t quite sound right, it is because somewhere down the line in the creative process, for which we have no manuscript evidence, probably in a further printer’s copy or even in proof, this phrasing was further refined: “It was completely dark when I arrived in the environs of Geneva; the gates of the town were already shut; and I was obliged to pass the night at Secheron, a village half a league to the east of the city.” Thus, it should be underscored that what Robinson’s edition allows us access to is a novel in the process of coming into being. Not all of the work is accounted for here. Though it is amply clear from the draft that the notion of nested narratives is crucial to the original design of the work, the entire epistolary foregrounding in Walton’s early letters is lacking. And Victor’s panegyric to Henry Clerval, as he narrates their trip to Britain, where he quotes a lengthy passage from Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” to honor his friend’s feeling for Nature, is the inspired invention of a later day to whose origin we simply do not have access.

Doubtless, some of the terms of the earlier debate over this novel will persist. Percy has an eye for context, as noted above, but he also tends to suggest a literary vocabulary that is more ornate than Mary’s customary manner, and here and there he provides a political nuance (emphasizing the “republican” virtues of Swiss society, for example) that was not in the original draft. But I don’t see that he ever actually alters Mary’s overall intent. Indeed, if one reads between the lines, he exhibits great respect for the integrity of her conception. It would have been easy to change the Creature’s first actual utterance (“Pardon this intrusion,” to the blind de Lacey) or his first phrase in the course of the novel (“I expected this reception” to the furiously
venting Frankenstein). Their extraordinary civility is, of course, the point, as both partners must have agreed. Moreover, where the original second half of the novel begins with the Creature’s narrative, the simplicity of his opening paragraph remains essentially untouched: “It is with difficulty that I remember the æra of my being. . . I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch. I knew and could distinguish nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept.” When the novel was printed the first sentence had been further refined (“considerable difficulty,” “original æra”), but there is no evidence of Percy’s hand in those emendations. Instead, what the draft allows us to remark is Mary’s Wordworthian capacity for an unelaborated pathos, which is one of the reasons that this novel has endured over the years.

In sum, then, for me what Robinson’s edition has accomplished is to clean out the cobwebs from an earlier stage of feminist critical response, which viewed any woman in Mary Godwin’s position as being almost necessarily victimized by a father or male lover. As I have tried here to demonstrate, the draft of Frankenstein does not reveal the opposite notion of empowerment, but rather something subtler and more to be celebrated, how Mary Godwin saw herself within a creative context, adding her own independent voice to those of her father and partner. And, with a certain poetic justice, her great myth of creation ex nihilo is, paradoxically, the work of a writer creating her own voice within a referentiality that her obsessed protagonist Victor Frankenstein could neither understand nor practice.