

# Excursions

Volume 4, Issue 1 (June 2013) Science/Fiction



Image credit: Tangi Bertin ([www.flickr.com/photos/tangi\\_bertin/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/tangi_bertin/)) CC by 2.0

Andrew C. Hageman, “Dismembering the Cautionary Cliché:  
Re-Reading the Techno-Science Ethics in Mary Shelley’s  
*Frankenstein*”,

Excursions, vol. 4, no. 1 (2013)

[www.excursions-journal.org.uk/index.php/excursions/article/view/75](http://www.excursions-journal.org.uk/index.php/excursions/article/view/75)

**Andrew C. Hageman**

*Luther College*

## Dismembering the Cautionary Cliché: Re-Reading the Techno-Science Ethics in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

For a thousand people familiar with the story of Victor creating his monster from selected cadaver spares and endowing them with new life, only to shrink back in horror from his own creation, not one will have read Mary Shelley's original novel. (Aldiss, 1973, p.23)

### I. Breaking Bones

In a wide range of public, academic, and governmental policy discourses, *Frankenstein* continues to appear today with an uncanny persistence. Many of these appearances, however, have taken on identities no longer connected to Mary Shelley's 1818 novel or to the field of literary studies. Instead, the word 'Frankenstein' has been transformed into a cultural signifier of a theological and/or technological cautionary tale about limits to and transgressions of human techno-scientific endeavors. The theological version invokes the name 'Frankenstein' to warn against trespassing on 'Nature' and/or 'Life' of which God as creator is presumed to hold exclusive intellectual property rights.

Ongoing public debates over such vanguard fields of techno-science as human genome mapping, bio-engineered cloning, and stem cell research rehearse the theological version.<sup>1</sup> The second cautionary version of 'Frankenstein' intersects with the same techno-scientific fields, but as secular warnings that humans will be radically mutated, if not annihilated, by our own innovations. During the Cold War era, this fear targeted nuclear-weapon technology and the computer-networking systems linked to their deployment, manifesting in texts like Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* and the *Terminator* trilogy that permeated the social imaginary. More recently, this technophobia has morphed into a strain of grave warnings about 'Frankenchips'—the synthesis of nerve cells and silicon chips—and genetically-engineered 'Franken-foods' (picture Boris Karloff as an angry ear of corn!). In fact, the image of corny Karloff is not far off from the anti-Monsanto images circulating on the Internet.<sup>2</sup>

While these various appearances demonstrate that *Frankenstein* is alive today, they also suggest that *Frankenstein* lives on as a monstrous form of its original creation. Just as *Frankenstein* continues to circulate in the social imaginary as a figure of techno-science and literary art, it does so as a cliché, largely ignorant of its textual ancestry. Sadly, literary criticism has not been immune to mis-reading *Frankenstein* with this predilection for immediately seeing the novel as a warning. For example, Anne K. Mellor claims that Mary Shelley, "presents Victor Frankenstein as the embodiment of hubris, of that Satanic or Faustian presumption which blasphemously attempts to tear asunder the sacred mysteries of nature" (1988, p.94). Harold Bloom, the arch-critic of mis-reading, suggests that, "Frankenstein, the modern Prometheus who has violated nature, receives his epitaph from the ruined second nature he has made" (1987. p.7). In these critical passages, amongst many others that echo them, one can perceive a pattern of *Frankenstein* scholarship being strangely bound to interpreting *Frankenstein* as a warning against disturbing an original, often sacrosanct, Other, whether God, Nature, or humanist conceptualizations of Life. Alternatively, Ludmilla Jordanova, Barbara Johnson, and Brian Easlea have interpreted Shelley's novel as a stern warning against the disastrous prospects inherent to masculine and/or patriarchal science.<sup>3</sup> Within literary criticism, then, no less than within social discourses more broadly conceived, the novel has become a creation perpetually maligned

and much misunderstood by all who gaze and judge without exfoliating the accretion of mis-readings.

The eminent scholar of *Frankenstein*, Marilyn Butler, has noted similar misuses of Mary Shelley's novel in the pivotal essay, '*Frankenstein* and Radical Science,' where she remarked, "Readers, filmgoers, people who are neither, take the very word Frankenstein to convey an awful warning: don't usurp God's prerogative in the Creation-game, or don't get too clever with technology" (1993, p.302). Butler is pointing to the transformations enacted upon 'Frankenstein', the process that has remade it into what Timothy Morton has called the "Frankenpheme" (2002, p.47). But, whereas Butler's essay returns our gaze to the religious and secular stakes of Mary Shelley's socio-historical context, such as debates regarding theories of electricity, magnetism, evolution, and so on, my essay dismembers the current cautionary notion of 'Frankenstein' by revealing fundamental contradictions in such a position through a sustained close reading of Shelley's novel.<sup>4</sup> This approach endeavors to be both an antidote to Brian Aldiss' apt remark that people presume to know 'Frankenstein' without having read the novel *Frankenstein*, and to complement the valuable techno-cultural history work already put in place by Marilyn Butler.

Thus, this essay aims to re-animate the horror actually present in the "dun white sockets" of this monumental novel, to borrow a phrase from its pages, and, in the process, to re-animate the vital nuances teeming below the surface of the crucial contemporary debates over techno-science that the cautionary cliché has mystified rather than clarified (1998, p.39). While Jon Turney concludes his book *Frankenstein's Footsteps* with the following claim: "And while the old stories may still improve with the telling, the advent of what really is a biological revolution means that we also badly need new stories; many new stories," this essay claims, on the contrary, that before moving to new stories we need to re-read *Frankenstein* and its cliché-progeny square in the eyes (1998, p.222). Only then can we work through the trauma that drives us obsessively to repeat this story while consistently avoiding the anxieties and imaginations that constitute our own techno-scientific traumas.

To that end, the essay focuses first on the inconsistent and deceptive language of the novel's initial 1818 Preface and the 1831 version that accompanied Shelley's substantially revised edition of the novel. The next

section of the essay maps Shelley's combination of organs, particularly the eye, with scientific ambitions throughout the novel to show how they embody complexities that destabilize unambiguously anti-techno-science interpretations. A third section examines passages of explicitly cautionary gestures in the novel to reveal how and why they consistently undermine the very warnings they appear to erect. The final section argues for the termination of the degraded 'Frankenstein' that we have for too long allowed to live. With this blueprint of the essay in place, let us begin at the textual beginnings of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

## II. Preface to Preface Encounters

The two prefaces of 1818 and 1831 explicitly contemplate the techno-science at work in the novel. Considering the complicated layering of narrators throughout *Frankenstein* (including the fact that Percy Shelley composed the Preface to the 1818 version), these prefaces are formally integral to the novel. In fact, the prefaces, with their non-fictional references to early nineteenth century techno-science, are vividly emphasized by the gap between them and the science fiction body of the novel—a gap paralleled by the lack of any account regarding the compilation and dissemination of Robert Walton's epistolary documents that comprise the novel itself. As Peter Brooks has noted of Walton's sister, to whom these letters are addressed, "She is inscribed as a kind of lack of being, leaving us with only a text, a narrative tissue that never wholly conceals its lack of ultimate reference and its interminable projection forward to no destination" (1979, p.219). The prefaces are all that exist as textual clues leading up to Walton's correspondence and the mysterious organization and animation of these documents. As such, the prefaces are vital components of *Frankenstein*. Furthermore, because the novel emerged during a time of the social debates over techno-science mentioned above, these prefaces were composed to assist the novel as it navigated through discursive embattlements not dissimilar to those in which it serves as cautionary cliché today.

The 1818 Preface formulates authorial intent by positing "human nature" as a primary positive subject of the novel: "I have thus endeavored to preserve the truth of the elementary principles of human nature, while I have not

scrupled to innovate upon their combinations” (1998, p.3). Because “human nature” can be appropriated just as easily by the discourse of religion as by science, this statement reveals only the murkiness of Shelley’s project. Shelley further propagates this obfuscation disguised as clarification with the authorial claim not to have innovated upon the combinations of human nature’s principles. Because this claim is posited within this first Preface to a tale of scavenging amongst corpses for cadaverous remnants with which to innovate a new type of human being, the statement’s sincerity must be read as dubious.

Further complicating the matter is the very next statement: “The opinions which naturally spring from the character and situation of the hero are by no means to be conceived as existing always in my own conviction, nor is any inference justly to be drawn from the following pages as prejudicing any philosophical doctrine of whatever kind” (1998, p.4). At first glance, this disclaimer resembles those appearing at the start of a film on DVD, declaring that the views and opinions expressed in the supplementary materials are not those of the production/distribution companies. The subtle difference, however, is the passive verb construction and diffusion of agency in Shelley’s prose. The stated prohibitions aim to regulate the readers’ reception of the text rather than to divorce the author from responsibility for the opinions, convictions, or philosophical doctrines expressed therein. In addition to this shift of responsibility from author to reader, the beginning of the sentence locates responsibility for the presence of controversial ideas within the techno-scientific material itself. Thus, whether “human nature” is appropriated for religious or scientific agendas, this appropriation must acknowledge the dark shadows that accompany techno-science. Even the most virtuous moralist is bound to get a little filthy when she goes rummaging about in “charnel houses” (1998, p.34).

To read the function of this 1818 Preface as an assertion, albeit an ambiguous one, of the literary creator’s denial of culpability for extra-literary associations, is to note a parallel with Victor Frankenstein’s repeated attempts to acquit himself during the course of narrating his past to Captain Walton. Thus, Mary Shelley (via Percy) joins Walton as another character peripheral to the novel’s central narrative events, yet inside the project of disseminating Frankenstein’s ignominy, and therefore prone to the same risks of techno-scientific speculation as the creature’s maker. As Barbara Johnson puts it,

“*Frankenstein*, in other words, can be read as the story of the experience of writing *Frankenstein*” (1987, p.63). In this way, the 1818 Preface both defends and indicts the author, blurring the novel’s cautionary prospects before they have even begun their narrative unfolding.

The complexity of the 1818 Preface intensifies in its 1831 re-creation. Shelley’s revision retreats from the ambiguity of the first. Or, so it seems. The statement, “Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world” would appear to present *Frankenstein* in a way resonant with how ‘Frankenstein’ is bandied about today (1998, p.196). Yet, the verb “to mock” is provocatively ambiguous. To mock can mean to mimic, to ridicule, or to create a model of a proposed machine. In relation to the first definition, Shelley’s verb choice suggests theological caution against techno-scientific endeavors that mimic God, the “Creator of the world.” However, the frightfulness solicited by creating a mock-up of the “stupendous creation” may suggest that the resultant terror emanates from the Creature itself rather than from an angry, jealous God. This latter interpretation is supported by Shelley’s next sentence: “His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken” (1998, p.196). She subtly elucidates her own use of “mock” by explaining the terror in terms of the scientist and the creature without mentioning God, the “Creator of the world,” or another third-party Other.

This combination of creation, imitation, and risk activated by the verbal ambiguity of “to mock” intersects productively with what Mellor describes as “a central tenet of Romantic poetic ideology: that the creative imagination must work spontaneously, unconsciously, and above all organically, creating forms that are themselves organic heterocosms” (1988, p.102). While Mellor critiques Victor’s creation as a defiance of this tenet, let us consider the invocation of this same Romantic ideology in the 1831 Preface. Shortly before the statement about mocking, Shelley writes, “My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie” (1998, p.196). As an unbidden vision, Shelley’s subject matter conforms concisely to the Romantic ideology of spontaneity and the work of the unconscious. Still, as this statement is situated in a new Preface to a revised version of the novel, one

questions the candor of her statement. Moreover, the rigorous revisions recorded in the *Frankenstein* manuscripts accentuate this question.<sup>5</sup> Shelley is, at turns, extolling the “organic” origin of her literary creation and aligning it with dangerous mimicry. From this perplexing amalgamation of spontaneity and simulation it seems that Shelley is deconstructing Romantic ideology even as she escalates the ambiguity of her theological and technological cautionary intentions for the novel.

With these manifold layers of dissimulation in the prefaces fleshed out, let us now rigorously dissect those passages within the novel that articulate Walton's and Frankenstein's techno-scientific ambitions and justifications.

### III. Organizing Ambition

In the opening narrative moments of the post-preface text, before Victor is even introduced to the reader, Captain Walton explicates the ambition propelling him to the North Pole in a letter to his sister. Walton positions his individual ambition as deeply social in composition: “I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited ...But supposing all these conjectures to be false, you cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation” (1998, p.6). Because we know in advance from the preface(s) that horrors resulting from scientific investigation lie ahead, Walton's social justification at this embryonic stage of the narrative acts as a thematic prolepsis, forecasting that Victor will issue a very similar justification for his own work. At this stage of the narrative, though, Walton's statement simply compels the reader to begin forming initial impressions of the ambition that lurks behind and drives the horror to come.

Walton's linkage of the individual with the social is vital. When he claims that even failure to attain the goal of this specific endeavor cannot negate its ultimate utility, Walton frames individual techno-scientific ambition within a utilitarian ethics that justifies the drive itself and the mistakes it may produce. That said, Walton's letter articulates a highly complex position. In the following paragraph he writes, “These reflections have dispelled the agitation with which I began my letter, and I feel my heart glow with an enthusiasm which elevates me to heaven; for nothing contributes so much to tranquilize



the mind as a steady purpose,—a point on which the soul may fix its intellectual eye” (1998, p.6). What he first described as “ardent curiosity” channeled into strictly scientific endeavor now appears to be an intricate networking of science, religion, and human organs: heart, mind, and eye.

The transition of Walton’s heart growing warmer and leading him to heaven because his mind is cooling off, “tranquilize[d],” by the “steady purpose” before him posits the heart and mind as antithetical organs. This binary involves theological stakes as Walton claims that religion is only accessible when the former organ supersedes the latter. This double dialectic of heart/mind and religion/science progresses rapidly into a complex synthesis that combines not only each binary, but the pair of binaries together, when Walton attributes intellectuality to the soul via the eye. Shelley’s use of the eye to represent the site for perceiving this fusion is suggestive since it was an important organ in scientific debates and investigations in the era of the novel’s composition, publication, and consumption. European thought was then under the influences of the Newtonian optics notion that objects emit light—a physics that emerged from the work of Descartes that famously and infamously declared the human body to be a machine. What is more, in his seminal 1802 work, *Natural Theology*, William Paley leveraged the development of the human eye as an anatomical parallel to his “watchmaker analogy” in support of his theory that God’s design is perceptible in the physical order of things, an organ method that Charles Darwin, who read *Natural Theology*, would later repeat in modified form in *On the Origin of Species*.<sup>6</sup> In addition to its resonances with the early nineteenth-century social concerns with optics, science, and theology, Shelley’s location of this double dialectical nexus in the eye is especially striking as this organ functions frequently throughout the novel as that part of the creature that most inspires horror in Victor.<sup>7</sup> Walton’s phrasing here mutually imbricates the reader in this system of dialectics. After all, it is the reader fixing her (intellectual) eye on the point of print that conveys the events of the captain, the doctor, and the creature.

Within this novel of proliferating doubles, this combination of science, religion, and the organs of the human body pointedly re-appears near the beginning of Victor’s autobiographical narration. At the very start of his studies at the University of Ingolstadt, Victor meets the two professors who

will direct his future studies. Following a sharply condescending response to his previous studies (Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, etc.) by M. Krempe, the first professor Victor meets, the evening meeting with M. Waldman, the other directing professor, renews his spirits. Particularly heartening is Waldman's assertion that, "The labours of men of genius, however erroneously directed, scarcely ever fail in ultimately turning to the solid advantage of mankind" (1998, p.31). By so closely reflecting the utilitarian ethics in Walton's letter, this passage implicitly connects Victor and Walton. When Victor concludes his recollection of this event by saying, "Thus ended a day memorable to me; it decided my future destiny," the novel juxtaposes him with Walton and delivers insight into the trajectory of Victor's life and endeavors, all with a linguistic twist that implies a re-ordination of the pre-ordained (1998, p.32).

As with Walton's invocation of utilitarian ethics, Victor's exchange with M. Waldman presents the religion/science dialectic through a logic of social justification. Lecturing earlier in the day, Waldman described an epistemic shift in the conception of science as a revision of the relationship between ambition and efficacy:

The ancient teacher of this science...promised impossibilities, and performed nothing. The modern masters promise very little...But these philosophers, whose hands seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pore over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places. They ascend into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. (1998, p.30)

M. Waldman's assertion, like its parallel Waltonian predecessor, sutures the vocabularies of religion and science by inserting "miracles" and "the heavens" into a historicization of science. As such, the parallel between Walton and Victor surpasses their mutual appeal to utilitarianism. The M. Waldman lecture also resembles Walton's letter as it, too, depicts individual organs that connect science and religion. Although Waldman does not identically replicate Walton's organization, he does mention the eye immediately before the depiction of scientific miracles: "and their eyes to pore over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places" (1998, p.30). Thus, near the beginnings of their respective narratives, Walton and Victor both frame

their ambitions as combinations of individualism and the greater social good, science and religion, and sundry human organs, with the eye serving as stitching point for where all these dialectics converge.<sup>8</sup> At this nexus point, the human body appears as a system of organs inhabited by the philosophies of science. Viewed from an inverse angle, the eye represents the human body as itself contained by a synthetic system of science and religion. Thus, the religion/science dialectic in *Frankenstein* embodies the perplexing techno-scientific situation Colin Milburn describes in his work on nanotechnology and science fiction, *Nanovision*: “Where bodies bleed with machines, where science bleeds with science fiction, the secure enveloping tissues of the human subject—cognitive, corporeal, and otherwise—rip apart” (2008, p.50).

The complex syntheses in these passages combine to rip apart the notion of objectivity in the principal organ of scientific investigation: the eye. Representing the eye as nexus point complicates assertions of a techno-scientific cautionary message based on an opposition between the supposed warmth of religion and frigidity of science. Tempting as it may be to follow Darko Suvin’s remark that, “The objective eye looking at empirical surfaces, that orthodox organ of things as they are, is balanced by the inward sympathy with the Creature’s subjective feelings,” Victor and Walton’s representations of the eye as the confluence of science and religion prohibit such a cautionary reading (1979, p.130).

After narrating his life up to the present day, Victor offers Walton a final warning against his desire for details about the monster’s construction: “‘Are you mad, my friend?’ said he, ‘or whither does your senseless curiosity lead you? Would you also create for yourself and the world a demoniacal enemy? Or to what do your questions tend? Peace, peace! learn my miseries, and do not seek to increase your own’” (1998, p.178). This speech gestures toward the Victor/Walton parallel at a moment of narrative shift from recollection of the past to the present, prospectively figuring Walton as Victor’s cautionary foil. But, just as the novel seems poised to take on an allegorical function, we learn that Victor has revised Walton’s transcript. This remark makes Victor’s tale of creation and the fatal aftermath reinforce, retroactively, the similarity of these two techno-scientists by insisting on a re-reading of the text from which the novel has just re-emerged. By fixing his eye on the narrative outline of his mind’s, heart’s, and hands’ activities, Victor puts all of these organs, motives,

and the science/religion dialectic back into play. As a result, it is unclear whether the autobiography recorded in the novel is Walton's original transcription or Victor's revision for posterity. (Does not this ambiguity of revision strikingly anticipate Mary Shelley's own revision of the novel to meet and/or slip past expectations from anticipated readerships?)

If we could know whether the narrated Victor was the one disclosing his past to Walton, like an analysand to his analyst, or the Victor who has amended his own case study before publication, we could adduce more from their shared utilitarian ethics and organization of ambition and endeavor. As the novel stands, however, the two-character parallel is undermined by the ambiguous status of Victor's autobiography, a point Victor underscores when he remarks, "I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed" (1998, p.186). What remains intact amidst the deeply wrought ambiguity in the correspondence between their characters is a reiterated assertion that the multiple dialectics at stake converge in the eye as it fixes its gaze. With that in mind, let us move from the subject who looks to the objects that are looked upon—the texts within Shelley's text.

#### IV. The Nature of Natural Philosophy

In addition to bolstering utilitarian ethics and organization of science and religion, Victor's declaration that the day of Waldman's lecture decided his future destiny mirrors a crucial statement that he made ten pages earlier: "Natural philosophy is the genius that has regulated my fate" (1998, p.22). "Destiny" reflects "fate" from the earlier articulation, and these signifiers of preordination present an unconventional interaction between agency and fate. Victor describes his fate as "directed" by a day and "regulated" by a field of thought such that, in a proto-Foucauldian way, he speaks of his scientific endeavors being prescribed by the discursive logic of the day. As Ludmilla Jordanova points out, Victor's self-positioning within a field of thought was common then among scientists. They situated themselves in a historical trajectory of science because, "they felt deeply implicated by the past...It was because savants felt vulnerable to the suggestion that magic, and an improper concern with death and the supernatural, were still part of the scientific enterprise that they felt the need to repudiate them firmly" (1994, p.63). In

this regard, Victor suggests that his choice was chosen for him by the parameters of science.

Reflecting on the day he told his father about his enthusiasm for Cornelius Agrippa's writing, Victor's chief regret is not that he had access to the text, but that his father, Alphonse Frankenstein, did not explain that Agrippa's natural philosophy had been rendered obsolete by recent discoveries.<sup>9</sup> Victor speculates, "It is even possible, that the train of my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin" (1998, p.23). At first glance, this articulation looks like it contains the raw materials for a cautionary invective against the texts that transmit destructive techno-scientific ideas. However, the cautionary potential of this moment is frustrated by the mixed metaphor of his "train of ideas" "receiv[ing] the fatal impulse".<sup>10</sup> In representing the moment when the grave misdirection occurred (the most significant moment from which we must learn if, indeed, we are to take away a techno-science message from this narrative), Victor cannot precisely articulate the process of going awry. He cannot make clear whether the matter and the motion of this "train of ideas" is inside or outside—whether it originates wholly or partly within him, and from where the "fatal impulse" comes. This mixed-up metaphor echoes the disclaimer quoted above in the 1818 Preface that distances the opinions and convictions from the author by making the agency of their arrival unclear. Moreover, the instability of the mirrored "fate" and "destiny" further exemplifies the elusive representations of agency in the novel's most apparently didactic moments.

Had Victor condemned outright the very contents of Agrippa's text, responsibility for the tragedy would have been located in this branch of natural philosophy. But, because the moment Victor isolates as the precise instant and object of his lament comes after he had already read Agrippa, the text itself is not the locus of danger, or, therefore, the locus of an extrapolated cautionary argument. Instead of blaming techno-scientific information and/or its textual conveyance, Victor regrets his unchecked faith in natural philosophy. Had his father simply apprised him that Agrippa's science would not work, Victor claims, he would have abandoned the text and the creature never would have been created. Thus, the real locus of danger for Victor is how one invests one's faith. Yet, just when it feels like Shelley is steering us toward theologically-oriented caution, it turns out that the faith capable of saving Victor is

grounded in material reality rather than religion. Instead of repenting for trespassing on God's territory or intellectual property, Victor says, "My dreams were therefore undisturbed by reality; and I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life" (1998, p.23). Put differently, a reality-based faith would have been Victor's saving grace.

Ironically, the natural philosophy in Agrippa's book is precisely the thing that does work. So, even the material reality-based faith that Shelley places in Victor's reflection gets blurry when examined too closely. To appropriate this unstable (con)fusion of faith, natural philosophy, and material reality for cautionary propagandistic purposes, theological or otherwise, would therefore be disingenuous. After all, any complications Victor poses regarding Agrippa are vital to *Frankenstein's* cautionary prospects because Shelley's novel can be read as a doppelgänger of Agrippa's text in her own readers' hands. *Frankenstein* withholds the technological details necessary to repeat Victor's creation, and Agrippa's text is represented indirectly as itself devoid of this critical information. What both texts do contain, though, is the prospect of making imagination manifest. In this light, if Shelley had meant her own novel to be a straightforward warning against techno-scientific advancement, she would have wanted to outdo Alphonse Frankenstein in discrediting the imaginative possibilities her own novel invokes.

If we return to the 1818 Preface, though, the first paragraph contextualizes *Frankenstein* with far weaker dismissal of its imagination than Alphonse's too-weak dismissal of Agrippa:

The event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr. Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence. I shall not be supposed as according the remotest degree of serious faith to such an imagination; yet, in assuming it as the basis of a work of fancy, I have not considered myself as merely weaving a series of supernatural terrors. <sup>11</sup> (1998, p.3)

From the indirection the first sentence creates through the double-negative "not of impossible" and the agency-obscuring "occurrence," this paragraph then links the social and scientific discourses of the world outside the novel with the same discourses inside it. By describing the fiction as founded upon an external event "not of impossible occurrence," the author clouds the relationship between science and fiction. The novel seems to transform and condense the external social debates over science and religion into a multi-

layered literary creation that circulates and functions outside of itself in the extra-literary social world from which Shelley drew the material. Yet, the issues the novel takes from outside actually circulate outside through textual transmissions. Viewed from this perspective, *Frankenstein* participates in the texture of science and religion within social discourse and debate inside itself and out.

Shelley's second sentence further complicates the situation. The phrase "according the remotest degree of serious faith to such an imagination" occludes the connections that link Shelley, the science imagined, and her evaluation of this science. Both Shelley and Victor identify "faith" as a critical action. Their assertions appear to warn against having faith in scientific imaginings unproven in material reality. But the warning becomes slippery here. Victor proves that his imaginings of Agrippa's science work and are thus worthy of faith. Likewise, the Preface claims that no faith is accorded, but a qualifying "yet" immediately follows this claim, making the apparent warning merely an apparition conjured through deceptive language. These examples contribute to a pattern of cautionary gestures throughout the novel that always disable the very warnings they invoke. As such, the ambiguities woven throughout the novel's fabric rule out appropriation of *Frankenstein* for cautionary propaganda. While the analyses in this section have shown how the novel defies simple anti-techno-science readings, the final section of this essay argues for the termination of the maligned 'Frankenstein' with which we haunt ourselves today.

#### V. *Bloom Runner*: Or, How to Retire a Replicant Cliché

In his book *Omens of Millennium*, the literary critic Harold Bloom argues that the genius of the ancient Jewish orthodoxy's attempt to erase heretical texts was their "refus[al]" even to mention the heretics, thus hoping to bury them forever. Rabbinical silence, more even than patristic denunciation, was immensely successful in its project to suppress what Idel calls "an inner controversy within Jewish thought" (1996, p.187). Following this logic, Shelley should have refrained from writing and circulating the novel if its purpose truly is to lead us away from techno-science. Instead, the existence of *Frankenstein* foregoes the silence that can be fatal to heretical discourse, and

it places what amounts to an updated, critical edition of Agrippa in the hands of myriad prospective Victors. From such a Bloomian perspective, we can also indict those who use the cautionary cliché 'Frankenstein' today. For, if imaginative productions are the things to be terminated, then, to call upon one of the most notable and obsessively reproduced imaginative productions in literary history (and cultural history more broadly conceived), ironically encourages the proliferation of the objects of fear and disgust.

More precisely, just as Bloom acknowledges in *Omens* that the compelling divination of Gnostic texts prevented them from disappearing entirely (and for their persistence he is joyful), this essay claims that *Frankenstein's* prescience is responsible for its longevity. To be succinct, *Frankenstein's* prescience resides in Mary Shelley's brilliant dialectic of reality-based faith and scientific dreams that demands attention and theorization while denying the possibility of polemical resolution. Thus, Shelley astonishingly narrates a meta-prognostication on the formula of science fiction as the imaginative production that can lead to reproductions inside and outside of texts, even as she is installing the spark of life into what can be considered to be the first of the science fiction literature species. From this critical perspective, even the most determined efforts to ossify *Frankenstein* into a cautionary cliché will, like Victor's attempts to forget about his creation amidst the sublime Alps, not succeed in bringing forth the good spirits they summon. Rather, every cautionary invocation of *Frankenstein* cannot help but give 'more life,' as both Harold Bloom and Roy Baty (the replicant rebel from *Blade Runner*—the most sublime of *Frankenstein's* progeny) are both fond of saying, to precisely the abhorrent productions and reproductions those who perpetuate this cliché so desperately wish to kill.

## Notes

1. Consider the following Google search results: 'Frankenstein theology' = 110,000 results; 'Frankenstein caution' = 127,000 results; and 'Frankenstein human genome project' = 26,700 results.



2. Paralleling the first note, the Google search 'Frankenstein foods' = 230,000 results. Modify the search for images, and you will find a fascinating array of modified corporate logos and packaging. For two excellent examples, see the November 21, 2008 piece "Junk Science: Frankenfoods for Dummies" at Phawker.com  
<<http://www.phawker.com/2008/11/21/junk-science-frankenfood-for-dummies/>>.
3. See Jordanova's 'Melancholy Reflection,' (74); Johnson's 'My Monster, My Self,' (66); and Easlea's *Fathering the Unthinkable*, (36, 58).
4. See Marilyn Butler's "Frankenstein and Radical Science" in the *Times Literary Supplement*, or its reprinting in the Norton Critical Edition of *Frankenstein*. Eric Jensen's essay "Scientific Controversies and the Struggle for Symbolic Power" also merits mention here. Jensen invokes *Frankenstein* in support of his argument that "New symbols that emerge during controversies tend to stay close to previously established conventional meanings and narratives, frequently drawing upon stock characters and themes from science fiction" (2012, p.170). Jensen's essay addresses this phenomenon of stock symbols broadly, such that the sustained close reading of the source-text for "Frankenstein" in my essay complements his work.
5. For a detailed study of the transcripts, see Ketterer's 'Frankenstein's "Conversion"'.
6. See Paley's *Natural Theology*, (23-30) and the "Organs of Extreme Perfection and Complication" section of Chapter 6: Difficulties on Theory in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (129-154).
7. For example, "I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open...His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriences only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost the same color as the dun white sockets in which they were set" (1998, pp. 38-9).
8. It is worth noting the centrality of optical symbolism with which Ridley Scott permeated *Blade Runner*, his 1982 cinematic progeny of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. For a detailed discussion of this, see the interview with Scott included in Paul M. Sammon's *Future Noir: The Making of Blade Runner*. In response to Sammon asking about the storyboards identifying the image of the eye that fills the screen near the start of the film as belonging to the replicant, Holden, Scott said, "That was the early intent, yes. But I later realized that linking that eye with any specific character was far too literal a maneuver and removed the particular emotion I was trying to induce" (1996, p.382).
9. Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim was a fifteenth/sixteenth-century German polymath who had an important impact on the intersections of philosophy, theology, and science, particularly prior to the paradigm shifts that accompanied what is often referred to as the Scientific Revolution. Mary Shelley is using him in the context of his books that bring

together magic and religion, the most famous of which is the 1530s trilogy, *Three Books Concerning Occult Philosophy*. Mary Shelley also invoked Agrippa in her short story 'The Immortal Mortal.' For a rich introduction to Agrippa and his contributions to intellectual history, see Marc Van Der Poel's *Cornelius Agrippa, the Humanist Theologian and His Declamations*. In relation to the 'Science/Fiction' theme of this issue, it is also worth noting the cultural impact of the major science fiction writer William Gibson's collaborative multi-media text called *Agrippa*, about which see Matthew Kirschenbaum's book, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (2007), and Alan Liu's *The Agrippa Files* website (2005).

10. There is an additional wrinkle to this mixed metaphor as "train of thought(s)" has transformed over time from its initial association with a procession of human beings to its contemporary association with railway machinery.

11. To be clear, Shelley is referring to Erasmus Darwin, a physician, scientist, and poet, rather than to Charles Darwin, the grandson of Erasmus and author of *On the Origin of Species* (1859). In fact, Erasmus Darwin offers a suggestive precedent to Shelley's combination of science and literature as his *The Botanic Garden* (1789) synthesized poetic verse, human-plant allegory, and extensive botanical scientific annotations.

## Bibliography

- Aldiss, B., 1973. *Billion year spree: the true history of science fiction*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc
- Bloom, H., 1987. 'Introduction.' In: H. Bloom, ed. *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: modern critical interpretations*. New York: Chelsea Publishing House, pp. 1-11
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1996. *Omens of millennium: the gnosis of angels, dreams, and resurrection*. New York: Riverhead Books
- Brooks, P., 1979. 'Godlike science/unhallowed arts: language, nature, and monstrosity.' In: G. Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, eds., *The endurance of Frankenstein: essays on Mary Shelley's novel*. Berkeley: University of California Press. pp. 205-220
- Butler, M., 1993. 'Frankenstein and radical science.' *Times Literary Supplement*. rpt. In: J. P. Hunter, ed. 1996. *Frankenstein: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. New York: Norton, pp. 302-313
- Darwin, C., 2009. *On the origin of species*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Easlea, B., 1983. *Fathering the unthinkable: masculinity, scientists, and the nuclear arms race*. London: Pluto Press
- Jensen, E., 2012. 'Scientific controversies and the struggle for symbolic power.' In: B. Wagoner, et al., eds., *Culture and Social Change: Transforming Society through the Power of Ideas*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishers, pp. 161-183
- Johnson, B., 1987. 'My monster, my self.' In: H. Bloom, ed. *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: modern critical interpretations*. New York: Chelsea Publishing House, pp. 55-66
- Jordanova, L., 1994. 'Melancholy reflection: constructing an identity for unveilers of nature.' In: S. Bann, ed., *Frankenstein: creation and monstrosity*. London: Reaktion Books, pp. 60-76

- Ketterer, D., 1997. 'Frankenstein's "conversion" from natural magic to modern science—and a *shifted* (and converted) last draft insert.' *Science Fiction Studies*. 24(1), pp. 57-72
- Kirschenbaum, M. G., 2007. *Mechanisms: new media and the forensic imagination*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Mellor, A. K., 1988. *Mary Shelley: her life, her fiction, her monsters*. New York: Methuen
- Milburn, C., 2008. *Nanovision: engineering the future*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press
- Morton, T., 2002. *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: a Routledge study Guide and sourcebook*. London: Routledge Press
- Paley, W., 1821. *Natural theology; or, evidences of the existence and attributes of the Deity, collected from the appearances of nature*. London: Richardson & Co
- Sammon, P. M., 1996. *Future noir: the making of 'Blade runner'*. New York: Harper Prism
- Shelley, M., 1998. *Frankenstein: 1818 text*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Savin, D., 1979. *Metamorphoses of science fiction: on the poetics and history of a literary genre*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Transcriptions Project. 2005. *The Agrippa files* [Online]. Available at: <http://agrippa.english.ucsb.edu/> [Accessed: 24 October 2012]
- Turney, J., 1998. *Frankenstein's footsteps: science, genetics and popular culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Van Der Poel, M., 1997. *Cornelius Agrippa, the humanist theologian and his declamations*. Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers