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Technology and Impotence in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

“Shall we put the heart in now?”

—Dr. Frankenstein to Dr. Praetorius in
The Bride of Frankenstein

AT THE MIDPOINT OF ALBERT CAMUS' FAMOUS PHILOSOPHICAL novel *The Stranger* (*L'Étranger*, 1942), the protagonist, Meursault, kills an Arab. He appears to shoot involuntarily, overcome with the heat, the sun, the sweat in his eyes, the blinding reflection from the Arab's knife, the wine at lunch, fatigue, thirst. When he realizes what he has done, how he has “shattered the balance of the day, the spacious calm of this beach on which I had been happy,” he deliberately chooses to fire four more shots into the “inert body.” The meaning of these additional shots has become a legendary crux of twentieth-century philosophy and literary criticism in numerous debates concerning the existential nature of human freedom and the nature of human freedom in Existentialism. But there exists another approach to the act, one that bypasses the familiar philosophical and psychological centers of the debate. This other, apparently philistine, approach I learned from a friend, a professor of engineering. He pointed out that Meursault shoots the Arab because the Arab has only a knife and he has a gun. The gun makes

the catastrophe possible, “because,” as my friend observed, “when you have the technology you use it.”

The effect of technology on human action, its influence on individual choice and institutional change, is the knotty center of its relation to our freedom, to our autonomy. Camus’ novel suggests that Meursault’s initial shot was largely determined by the protagonist’s surroundings and by the gun in his hand, that the influence of his own will was minimized by the forces of the environment and the technology, and that firing the gun was effectively involuntary. Then, perhaps in order to reassert the primacy of his own will and choice, Meursault fires the additional, “undetermined” shots in an act that can be seen as “free,” the *acte gratuit* explored by earlier writers (like André Gide) interested in the problematic of choice and causality. Meursault yields to external influences in firing the first round, but then regains command by *choosing* to fire the next four. The potential cost to his own interests (to say nothing of those of the Arab) suggests the importance he attaches to his power of choice. We can see that the ethical difficulties involved in the analysis of such choice can compound rapidly, as my engineer friend knew. His point was not that these questions involving choice and freedom and morality have no practical content but that the technology at hand influences the content by altering the possibilities of action, changing its range and timing and radically enlarging its consequences. Or, to put the matter more simply, the technology can usurp power traditionally reserved to human will.

Technology usurps and empowers simultaneously. It usurps authority at precisely the moment of empowerment, and this paradoxical effect means that all serious discussion of technology must involve a discussion of values. Technology appears to usurp the value-function, substituting its own imperatives at moments of choice, moments when we would desire and expect the application of values we think of as “human.” Technological developments have a way of intersecting or ambushing the traditional values or at least of radically altering the contexts in which they operate, a fact of immense political consequence. We can see, for example, that the absolute political dictatorships of the preceding century relied heavily on techniques of surveillance and oppression unavailable to their predecessors. Such reliance has also been explored in numerous novels and films that deal with the perversions of technology in dystopias. Among the most influential of these are Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1920), Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), and George Orwell’s *1984* (1949). These novels make the point that certain kinds of moral or ethical choice (and certain kinds of repression of ethical choice) would be impossible without certain technological achievements. This strongly indicates

that our values never exist independent of the means of empowerment—our tools, our technology—but operate in a kind of intimate duality of alliance and conflict with them. It is the potential for conflict between the technology and the values that gives rise to the fear of usurpation, the fear of technology's influence on our freedom and autonomy.

Technology and Usurpation

Over the past two centuries this fear has been embodied in a narrative, now raised by its universally felt significance to the status of myth, the myth of Frankenstein. From its archetypal expression in Mary Shelley's novel (*Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, 1818; revised by the author 1831) the myth of a technological abortion or "monster" ranging out of ethical control has continued to grow. The story formed the basis of numerous nineteenth-century stage productions, such as Richard Brinsley Peake's significantly titled *Presumption; or The Fate of Frankenstein* (1823). The narrative's immense success in all its multiple permutations testifies to its continuing cultural relevance and it is not surprising that its perpetuation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was largely the work of the most technologically advanced medium, film. From the beginnings of cinema as a popular art, Frankenstein's monster has repeatedly come to life on the screen—and usually as the creation that threatens its creator. Even before James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) and his equally admired *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), both with Boris Karloff, there was a one-reel *Frankenstein* in 1910 and a five-reel *Life Without a Soul* in 1915.² Many more could be added, varying in quality from the silliest heavy-handed contemporary production of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (Kenneth Branagh, 1994) to such loving and lovable spoofs as *Young Frankenstein* (Mel Brooks, 1974).

Nor does the myth require containment exclusively in Dr. Frankenstein's own laboratory. There were versions of it in Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and Paul Wegener's *The Golem* (1920). It has never gone out of fashion and in recent years the movies have offered numerous versions of a creation usurping the space, the freedom, the power, even the time of its creator. Among the most successful of these have been Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in which the ship's computer tries to take over the mission; Michael Crichton's *Westworld* (1973) where a renegade robot, the nearly perfect Yul Brynner, starts shooting the resort's guests; and Ridley Scott's superb *Blade Runner* (1982, director's cut 1991) which represents the doomed rebellion of a small group of "replicants." It is almost unnecessary to cite the immensely successful *The Terminator* (1984) and

Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991), both directed by James Cameron, in which the ethical character of the robots, like their appearance, shifts ground and in which “the war against the machines” leads to human hands-on destruction of the most advanced technology—demonstrating that while technology is about what we *can* do it is also always leads to questions of what we will agree to do and not to do, what we will accept and what we will refuse. There is even a scene in *Terminator 2* where the brilliant scientist tries to destroy the world-threatening microchip with an ordinary axe.

To those who are not science fiction or film enthusiasts it will seem as if I’m offering more detail than necessary to make this point. In fact, I’ve cited a very small proportion of the films pertinent to this discussion, and if I were to include the relevant novels since the original *Frankenstein* my case would drown in its own evidence. Probably the major preoccupation of popular culture over the past century has been the tendency of technological developments to invade and disempower traditional values. This is evidence not just of our interest in the problems posed by technology; this is evidence of a cultural obsession. We can’t seem to get enough of this narrative. It’s our chief story, a myth comparable to that of the loss of paradise and the fall of man in Genesis. It is in fact our version of that myth, expressed as the fall of humanity from a projected technological paradise into an actual technological crisis. All of the films mentioned here deal with the same subject: *what it means to be human*. In terms of the Frankenstein myth, the myth of our technology, this philosophical problem can be broken down into two decisive ethical questions: What are the limits of legitimate power, of authority that can claim to be ethical? And how are these limits related to our freedom to choose—given that in our culture this freedom and power have been bound up since the Book of Genesis with our vision of our identity as special beings, as chosen, as human?

Such questions indicate the deep implications of technology, its persistent tendency to lead us far beyond considerations of material progress or manipulations of our physical environment. I will be exploring them in more concrete and specific terms when I turn to an analysis of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the one remarkable primary version of the myth that still touches on everything. But as a preface to that I want to propose a working definition of technology that will locate it strictly in relation to our discussion of values.

Technology is not a value in the same fundamental sense that antiquity, humility, freedom, or power are values. It serves to express, aid, and extend values. Values tend to be ends in themselves rather than means, though they often function as

empowering motives. Technology derives from the Greek word *techne*, meaning art, craft, skill, and it carries connotations of organized, systematic activity. In ancient Greek and Roman culture, and to a lesser degree in European culture generally up through the eighteenth century, *technology* tended to be the realm of the “mechanical,” meaning the province of those who labored with their hands, and therefore of slaves and other craftspeople. Their social status can be deduced from the words of the Tribune Flavius at the beginning of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*:

What, know you not,
Being mechanical, you ought not walk
Upon a laboring day without the sign
Of your profession? Speak, what trade art thou?³

The skill or trade lay in the hands and the hands provide the link between the person and the tool, the nexus of the human with the non-human.

This central significance of the human hand as the connection between the brain and the environment, between the mind and the world perhaps inherits its force from the long process of our evolution and the aboriginal reciprocity between our nature and our culture. From the pebble axe to the laurel leaf blade our brains as well as our minds grew with our technology. And this intimate connection between what we do and what we are often finds an emblem in the human hand. This appears to be well understood or at least intuited by the latter day manipulators of the Frankenstein myth. It is still exciting to watch Boris Karloff reach out toward the light in his great interpretation of the monster and then to notice how his huge and awkward hands, hanging from his wrists like unfamiliar tools, seem to change their character from pathetic and imploring to menacing. In *Westworld* the easiest way to tell a robot from a guest is to look at its hands, because, as one guest puts it, “Supposedly you can’t tell, except by looking at the hands. They haven’t perfected the hand yet.”⁴ In *Blade Runner* the revealing organ is the eye (though this requires a careful screening and verbal test to determine the origin of the being), but the hand is not forgotten. The chief replicant, played by Rutger Hauer, finds as he begins to die that his hand starts to go first. He breaks two of the blade runner’s fingers in revenge for the loss of his friends (fellow replicants) and drives a nail into his own palm in a twisted bit of Christ symbolism—but also to keep his hand functioning. In *Terminator 2*, the surviving pieces of the previous terminator are a microchip (to represent its brain) and an exquisite metal forearm and hand. When

the “good” terminator needs to prove his identity to the prospective inventor of the lethal chip, he strips the skin from his arm and displays the working of his bright metal hand—a duplicate of the surviving part.

Dr. Frankenstein’s Disease

Mechanisms like pebble axes and computers and robots are tools, extensions of the hand of the being that devises them. A question thus arises almost naturally of at what point the tool assumes an identity separate from its creator or owner, at what point it acquires autonomy. At what point does the creature have the right to assert independence, to exercise choice, to create in its own right? The Frankenstein myth thus raises rich and complex possibilities for those who see themselves as creations, as God’s creatures or as Nature’s, and also as potential creators (even if “only” as parents). Are human beings unique in their prerogative to think of themselves both as creatures and as creators? Are we the only creations with authority to create? Or, to question the dark side of the parable that rises from our technology, in what sense are we ourselves tools of the universe, employed or discarded without consultation, without freedom? It was the fear aroused by these resonant speculations, a kind of echoing awe, that Mary Shelley sought in her story of Dr. Frankenstein.

We can enter further into the source of this fear by asking whether it is simple ignorance that leads people who have not read the novel to assume that the name Frankenstein refers to the monster rather than the scientist. The confusion is rich in implication. It suggests a merging of identity that implicates the creator in his creation: there exists a sense in which the creation images the creator and perhaps there is even a sense in which the monster (the technological achievement ranging out of control) represents an extension of the human scientist (the technologist who ought to be in control). The confusion of the creation with the creator also suggests a familial, hereditary lineage in which the offspring carries the name of the father and so becomes his link with the future, his representative through time. It is this ancient assertion of parent-child identification that I want to pursue at the beginning of my analysis of the novel

We first notice that Mary Shelley took pains to give Victor Frankenstein a happy childhood under the care of devoted parents. His description of their attitude toward their parental duties is striking:

I was their plaything and their idol, and something better—their child, the innocent and helpless creature bestowed on them by Heaven, whom

to bring up to good, and whose future lot it was in their hands to direct to happiness or misery, according as they fulfilled their duties toward me.⁵

The idea that the parents have duties toward their children is of course a familiar one to parents, but in view of Victor Frankenstein's future abandonment of his creation (a kind of child, as the monster sees himself) this emphasis on his own parents' feelings of duty toward him seems very carefully planted:

With this deep consciousness of what they owed toward the being to which they had given life, added to the active spirit of tenderness that animated both, it may be imagined that while during every hour of my infant life I received a lesson of patience, of charity, and of self-control, I was so guided by a silken cord that all seemed but one train of enjoyment to me. (35)

What Mary Shelley stresses here is the sacred duty of parenthood rooted in religious belief and practice, the obligation of parents to act as providential agents toward their children, to act as stewards for divine benevolence in relation to their offspring:

No human being could have passed a happier childhood than myself. My parents were possessed by the very spirit of kindness and indulgence. We felt they were not the tyrants to rule our lot according to their caprice, but the agents and creators of all the many delights which we enjoyed. (39)

With these lessons behind him it seems strange that Dr. Frankenstein can extend no such care to his own creation.

He fails because he misconceives his primary relationship with the monster. When he discovers the secret of life ("animation") Frankenstein sees himself as a kind of surrogate providence. Having penetrated "the deepest mysteries of creation" (49), he imagines his creatures' gratitude flowing his way rather than recognizing his obligations toward them:

A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. (55)

He will not only be a parent; he will be a god to his creatures. They will worship him and this arrangement he presents as a kind of paradise.

As Mary Shelley's early nineteenth-century readers would have understood without effort, Frankenstein is bent on usurpation. He plans to employ his new technology to create a race of dependents who will worship and praise *him*, usurping what was almost universally regarded as a divine prerogative. In what must certainly have seemed to Mary Shelley a distinctly masculine attitude toward generation (she wrote the novel amid extreme trials of maternity and loss), Frankenstein views his scientific paternity as the legitimate gratification of vanity and the extension of his authority. But in fact he violates a primal contract, the universal contract between creator and created, which specifies that the father owes his children the means to live, that creation mandates nurture.

Frankenstein can create but he cannot nourish. His instant, self-indulgent, petulant rejection of the monster confirms the catastrophe. After two years of work putting the creature together he finally gives it life. Exhausted, he has a dream in which his fiancée turns into his dead mother in her shroud (a precious moment for psychoanalytic dispositions as suggesting the incestuous interaction between desire and death) and awakes to find his creature staring at him:

I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. . . . one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped. . . . Oh! no mortal could support the horror of that countenance. (59)

Ignoring the near miracle of his own achievement and the infantile plea of his creature (it resembles a grotesque infant), Dr. Frankenstein rejects it on strictly aesthetic grounds. Why? The passages in which he tries to explain this rejection are painful to read, profoundly troubling in their hysterical rationale of paternal abandonment. And that rejection of providential stewardship carries with it troubling suggestions of cosmic abandonment, of creatures destitute of provision because their creator cannot or will not nourish. In the specific case of Dr. Frankenstein we can conclude that he rejects his creation because it does him no credit, because it is hideous, because it images something about himself that he cannot bear to acknowledge. It suggests that *he* is a monster. The story of Dr. Frankenstein is the story of a man with a breakthrough and it is even more the story

of his breakdown. After he rejects the monster, denies his paternity, the monster roams loose on the world, creating suffering and havoc, especially for its creator.

Dr. Frankenstein had a choice. In fact he had a number of choices. He chose to usurp the prerogatives of God, of the Creator of living things. This the novel treats as a mistake, and Frankenstein himself comes to see it that way, especially when in a characteristic fit of disgust he destroys the mate he has promised the monster. Human knowledge, as Faustus learned before Frankenstein, should not extend into the prerogatives of the divine. And yet there is a sense in which this argument remains unconvincing, verging toward mere conventional moral pap. Mary Shelley's initial intended audience was her radical poet husband and the man who gave nihilism its romance, Lord Byron. The Shelleyan free spirit and the Byronic hero were not to be constrained or even limited by such pieties. In fact, the real usurpation, betrayal, ultimate failure lies not in the heroic act of creation but in the more pedestrian act of denial, of withdrawing when confronted with dire need. The problem is not at this point with power in itself; the problem is with the consequences of creative power, of potency. The problem lies not with the science or the tools themselves but with where they have taken us.

One way to see how prophetically Mary Shelley caught this direction in her representation of Frankenstein's failure is to cover the structure of the novel with a specific psychological grid, itself a technological achievement. The grid I propose to use is Freud's dramatic early twentieth-century reconstruction of the self as composed of ego, superego, and id. This emblematic pattern fits the novel's psychological structure almost perfectly, with Frankenstein as the narrating sentient ego or "I"; the idealized, selfless, virtuous Elizabeth (the narrator's betrothed) as superego; and the monster as denied id. Why this fit seems almost watertight may amount to little more than a serendipity of cultural history, but more probably derives from the function of psychoanalysis to sum up so much of those nineteenth-century quandaries and aspirations of duty and fulfillment, the internal warfare of desire with morality, that Mary Shelley's novel suggestively illuminates. Freud's theories would in this context embody a *fin de siècle* attempt to come to terms with the elemental psychological forces celebrated in European Romanticism from the French Revolution through the first decades of the nineteenth century, the period of *Frankenstein's* composition.

Psychoanalysis may be seen as a method for making a voyage of discovery, an internal expedition into the unknown, and it was sometimes regarded as a kind of irresponsible adventuring into the monstrous that might awaken destabilizing passions difficult to put back in order. Sigmund Freud was ambivalently regarded—

and has sometimes been celebrated—as a kind of Faust figure going beyond the boundaries established by morality and religion, the boundaries Frankenstein comes to regret transgressing. Freud’s discovery, psychoanalysis, the “talking cure,” seemed for a time to promise imperial governance of a region that had been beyond rational control because it was beyond scientific knowledge, the region of the unconscious. Freud proposed an inward voyage of discovery and devised the technology to take it.

It may be because of these affinities that a dynamic application of psychoanalytic terminology applies so neatly to *Frankenstein*. We have, first of all, the speaking ego—two of them in fact. The first narrator, Walton, foreshadows the narrator Frankenstein, for whom he feels an intense admiration and sympathy. Walton is engaged in a literal voyage of discovery to “the pole”—which he incredibly imagines as a kind of paradise. For our purposes of psychoanalytic application his self-justification must be quoted at some length:

I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight. There, Margaret, the sun is for ever visible, its broad disk just skirting the horizon, and diffusing a perpetual splendor. . . . there snow and frost are banished; and, sailing over a calm sea, we may be wafted to a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe. . . . What may not be expected in a country of eternal light? . . . I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man. These are my enticements, and they are sufficient to conquer all fear of danger or death, and to induce me to commence this laborious voyage with the joy a child feels when he embarks in a little boat, with his holiday mates, on an expedition of discovery up his native river. (15-16)

If we compare this rationale with Frankenstein’s own self-indulgent wish to play providence to the creatures he expects to create, we can see that it contains—as an introductory parallel—the same psychological elements. It reveals a childish, narcissistic self-preoccupation in which all events and all animate beings become relevant only as they contribute to the gratification of the perceiving ego. The fantasized untrodden, virgin country exists concentrically for the happiness of the discoverer. But as the novel demonstrates, Walton is not on a child’s “expedition of

discovery” with his “holiday mates,” but on a dangerous excursion over the broad, mysterious, treacherous sea of unexplored knowledge; and his “mates,” when they find themselves seriously threatened, challenge his authority with mutiny.

In the same letter to his sister, Walton adds that before he became an explorer he “became a poet, and for one year lived in a Paradise of my own creation.” The idea of a paradise of one’s own creation is itself regressive and narcissistic, implying as it does that the self is all-in-all and ignoring as it must the outcome of the original mythic experience of paradise. We could see it as an expression of the Romantic ego—representatives of which Mary Shelley had closely in view in Byron and her husband, perhaps the type of poets “whose effusions,” according to Walton, “entranced my soul” (16). In any case, this egocentric impulse toward infantile gratification of primitive impulses at all costs, when isolated from those social contexts that contain, integrate, and contextualize desire, produces the monstrous. And the penalty for this, as Frankenstein (still showing ambivalence toward his creation) tells Walton, is to be condemned to pursue and eradicate one’s product. This parable is the parable of technology: as the tool extends its power, the ego that directs it becomes more dangerous and more liable to self-destruction.

When Frankenstein realizes that his technology rather than producing “excellent beings” actually leads to the monstrous, he rejects it. He tries to treat the monster as merely a failed experiment, not as an intimate extension of himself. With a self-absorbed masculine gesture of denial he tries to walk away. But this doesn’t work. It doesn’t work because the monster is Frankenstein more fully and more intimately than any natural child could be. Mary Shelley shows this in many ingenious ways, all of them subject to astonishingly straight-forward psychoanalytic explanation.

In the first place, when his younger brother William is killed, Frankenstein realizes immediately and intuitively that the monster must be responsible: “Nothing in human shape could have destroyed that fair child. *He* was the murderer! I could not doubt it. The mere presence of the idea was an irresistible proof of the fact.” This equation between the speculation and the confirmation suggests—with one of those preternatural insights that romantic writers sought—an internal fusing between imagination and evidence, conception and explanation. Frankenstein knows what his monster does because the monster is his own:

I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind, and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror, such as the deed which he had now done, nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own

spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me. (78)

As Freud was to conclude, the id contains two primal forces, eros (sexual desire or love) and thanatos (aggression or death). Only eros can be socialized, redirected and diffused (and in cases of extreme achievement, sublimated) toward a consideration of the well-being of others. Thanatos, the destructive power, retains its original direction and cannot be socialized. Bit by bit the monster loses its capacity to love because the social impulse, eros, is perpetually blocked. The monster turns to evil because it has nowhere else to go, and it has nowhere else to go because Frankenstein, its origin and source, has *denied* it. And as in psychoanalytic theory, the denial, the repression, cannot last: the monster returns.

This repeated act of denial has consequences for the ego, the narrating “I,” just as Freud said it would. After he denies the monster, Frankenstein becomes less and less effectual, less potent. When duty clearly calls on him to testify as to his creation and save the falsely condemned Justine Marie from execution for little William’s murder (the monster has framed her), Frankenstein cannot act: “my purpose of avowal died away on my lips” (90). When confronted with another being in dire need he again freezes. The paralysis derives directly from repression: unless the ego acknowledges the forces of the id, the id will rule—and so the monster does.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the most interesting consequences of the denial have to do with Frankenstein’s relation to his betrothed, the sublimely virtuous Elizabeth. She represents all goodness and appears to be without longings for herself. She grew up alongside Frankenstein, like a sister, like a possession (as he first regards her), and he demonstrates a pronounced lack of passion for her. After all, she is already eternally his own. Rather than erotic fulfillment, she comes to stand for the obligations of social normalcy; marriage to her represents the life the narrator *ought* to enjoy but for which he shows little active inclination. In Mary Shelley’s novel, as often in psychoanalysis, when a man denies his monster he goes limp. Frankenstein puts Elizabeth off so often that she offers to release him from his engagement; he rejects this idea and then continues to put her off. He treats her as she treats herself, as devoid of erotic inclination and as infinitely patient and virtuous. In fact she *embodies* patience and virtue, the distillation of altruism, and so almost beyond earthly accommodation, a Christian superego of devotion and selflessness.

This psychological / ethical allegory is not hidden in the novel, but insisted upon (though not, of course, in Freudian terms). Mary Shelley’s achievement lies not in

disguising it (as it might be disguised in a patient under psychoanalysis) but in fleshing it out in credible character, in making it believable. It is in fact so bold as to run to the grotesque. When Frankenstein destroys the monster's uncompleted mate in violation of their agreement, the monster tells him: "remember, I shall be with you on your wedding-night." The simple and straight-forward interpretation here seems perfectly obvious to the reader: as you destroyed my mate I will destroy yours. Even the makers of the crassest Frankenstein films can see this. But in the novel, Frankenstein himself, bedded in his internal negotiations, lost in his solipsistic narcissism, thinks that the threat refers to his *own* safety. In his characteristic inactive lethargy he muses:

Why had I not followed him and closed with him in mortal strife? But I had suffered him to depart, and he had directed his course towards the mainland. I shuddered to think who might be the next victim sacrificed to his insatiate revenge. And then I thought again of his words—"I will be with you on your wedding-night." That then was the period fixed for the fulfillment of my destiny. In that hour I should die, and at once satisfy and extinguish his malice. The prospect did not move me to fear; yet when I thought of my beloved Elizabeth,—of her tears and endless sorrow, when she should find her lover so barbarously snatched from her,—tears, the first I had shed for many months, streamed from my eyes, and I resolved not to fall before my enemy without a bitter struggle. (173)

What finally makes him weep is the image of Elizabeth's potential grief for the loss of himself—clearly in his view the ultimate depravation—and again the emotion is self-referential, self-recreating. It will do *her* no good. In fact, like a patient with a deeply repressed secret, the secret of the monster, the narrating ego will ignore the obvious. The sane reader finds it grotesque that Frankenstein cannot see the sane monster's evident intention to kill the sublimated Elizabeth: it is the *superego* that the id is after! And the thought is not far off that if anything at all is to happen on the wedding night the monster had better be there. The ego will be impotent.

Technology and Freedom

How, in this discussion of technology, did we get from power to impotence? What is it about technological power that seems to lead to weakness? Or, to put the question in terms of our discussion of Dr. Frankenstein and his succeeding

permutations in our cultural history, do his weaknesses reappear in our current technological advances? To what extent are his liabilities general to our contemporary technology? Do we still self-indulgently create and consume our creations without forethought? Do we lose ourselves in self-congratulation? Do we evade the full consequences of our advances: denying the ugly while claiming the beautiful, forgetting the new sickness while celebrating the new cure, ignoring the impoverishment while squandering the wealth? All thoughtful people know the answer to these questions—though some might add that we show a few late signs of improvement. But this is not the place, and I am not the writer to enter on a polemic against our technology (I love it too). My point is that to exercise true authority the liabilities of the vast technological extensions of power must be recognized. And by this I do not mean the acknowledged damage to the physical and cultural environment. I mean the inner liabilities, Dr. Frankenstein's liabilities, that such extensions of power bring so vividly to light and make so dangerous.

Technology brings into sharp relief the implications for authority of a relatively new conception of freedom, the conception of radical individual self-determination. This conception may be the dominant one today, and so familiar to most Americans and many Europeans that it goes almost unquestioned, especially after its development in anti-totalitarian, anti-deterministic movements such as Existentialism (Meursault's costly freedom) and especially as it functions as a premise: that the right of the individual to self-determination is primary. We forget that this idea has achieved respectability only very recently and that its numerous problems are still in process of resolution.

Traditional, socially contextual conceptions of freedom were questioned and revised during the European Enlightenment (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and the American and French revolutions. They were radically challenged or abandoned during the Romantic period (approximately the period from the French Revolution through the first third of the nineteenth century), the period of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. There had of course been earlier representations of individuals who denied their social or religious obligations, immoralists and nihilists like Edmund in Shakespeare's *King Lear* or like Marlowe's Dr. Faustus. But such characters were conscious of their alienation and of their war to the death with the moral world around them. Dr. Frankenstein must be among the first characters to feel socially justified in his unlimited pursuit of knowledge. He manages to ignore established boundaries and obligations without seeing himself as a social outcast—at least at first. In showing the consequences for him and his community, Mary Shelley follows and continues an intense speculation

on the nature of human beings and their social obligations. As we have seen, her conclusions are not optimistic. Her protagonist ends up in a riddle of escape and pursuit, pursued by and pursuing his monster.

What brings the question of such radical freedom to our immediate attention is its association with technological advance. *Because* he conceives of himself as ethically unfettered, Frankenstein develops the science to create, or at least to recreate, life. He masters the technology to create a monster. The mastery, the power, appears to be inseparable from the freedom to achieve it and this freedom depends upon the ability to conceive of oneself as socially unfettered, a free creative spirit, someone paradoxically licensed to transgress ethical boundaries in the name of social progress. In this regard Dr. Frankenstein is a twisted predecessor of Raskolnikov as a failed *Übermensch*. The concept and the practice of technological advance take on a new and unpredictable character, the character of the free creator, a godlike character, the character of usurpation. The achievement of this character is potentially costly: in the case of Frankenstein and his many cultural descendants the cost appears to be the denial of those values that seemed for most of our history to constitute our humanity. Radical self-determination can lead us out of the realm of the human, at least out of the traditionally human. Paradoxically, the consequent psychological crisis can be expressed in terms of impotence; the power lures us to a social, ethical, emotional desert, to death rather than life.

Finally, this crisis leads to a general realization about our technology: that it is *us*. Frankenstein's monster is Frankenstein; the creation expresses the creator. The bomb, pollution, land-mines, poison gas, the stealth bomber are us. And so are motion pictures, relativity theory, vaccines, foreign aid, language, the symphony orchestra, durable pigments. It enriches our conception and our exercise of authority to know this, to acknowledge it. Our tools, far from being alien and inhuman, richly express human aspirations. Only we can use them: they are fitted to our hands. I am typing on the keyboard of my computer and I might be at the controls of an F-22 or holding a lariat or a violin. I can't deny that these tools express me, are made in my image. The Frankenstein myth tells me what will happen if I deny the resemblance. As Emerson summed it up in his essay on self-reliance, "My giant goes with me wherever I go."⁶

Notes

1. Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage, 1954), 76.

2. Albert J. LaValley, "The Stage and Film Children of *Frankenstein*: A Survey"; William Nestrick, "Frankenstein and the Nature of Film Narrative"; both articles in *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
3. William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, ed. S. F. Johnson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 27 (1.1.2-5).
4. *Westworld* (1973), dir. Michael Crichton, perf. Richard Benjamin, Yul Brynner, James Brolin.
5. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, ed. Maurice Hindle (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 35. This text is based on the third edition (1831) and contains Shelley's final revisions.
6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Richard Poirier (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 46.

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