

MARY SHELLEY & THE ROMANTIC IMAGINATION



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Coleridge winked. “Imagination,” he said, “owes no allegiance to time or space.” —*Requiem for the Author of Frankenstein*



TO ESTABLISH THE GROUND, I WANT TO BEGIN by parsing the language that defines this talk, that is, to examine the words that make up the title, looking specifically at the meaning of “Romantic” and “Imagination” and “Romantic Imagination” before exploring the implications of viewing the whole (that’s *whole* with a “w”) through the eyes of the feminine in the person of *Frankenstein’s* author, Mary Shelley, who, as might be apparent from the quote I just read, is the subject of my newly published novel, *Requiem for the Author of Frankenstein*, which, I will try to entice you into reading by suggesting that it too is an artifact of the Romantic Imagination.

—❧ROMANTICISM❧—

ROMANTICISM HAS BEEN BEAUTIFULLY SUMMARIZED in Rick Tarnas’ *Passion of the Western Mind*. He begins by placing it context, describing it as a “temperament” or “general approach to human existence,” which is, at it’s core, the polar opposite of the mindset of the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment, which “stressed rationality, empirical science and a secular skepticism.” Romanticism emerged in the late eighteenth century in the shadow of the French Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic Wars. It championed the very qualities of mind and human experience that rationality sought to suppress. As Tarnas points out, these two Western temperaments have common roots: you can find precursors of both in the Classical world and in the Renaissance. And they share common ground:

- The tendency toward a humanistic perspective
- A fascination with consciousness and its hidden components
- An elevation of Promethean individualism and its consequent rebellion
- An awareness of Nature as the setting for human endeavor

The difference between Romanticism and the Enlightenment lies in attitude and approach. Romanticism views nature as a holistic organism, a living vessel of spirit, rather than a mindless machine. It values inspiration over reason; emotional truth over abstraction; the imaginative over the rational; the spontaneous over the controlled; the sublime over the commonplace. It elevates our capacity to live in and with Nature over our capacity to subdue and control it; and our spiritual aspirations over our intellectual ambitions. Romanticism echoes with the wisdom of indigenous peoples, the traditions of the ancient mystery cults, the metaphysics of alchemy, and with the spirit of the medieval monasteries. It celebrates emotional depth, artistic endeavor, creative self-expression and individuality. It worships genius, believing brilliance is born in the enigma of transcendence, the mystical union between human and celestial. Formed in reaction to the strictures of Enlightenment, Romanticism's mission is to change humanity's perceptions of reality.

—IMAGINATION—

IN ACADEMIA, IMAGINATION IS CONSIDERED a notoriously slippery, systematically vague, rhetorical, unscientific and *polysemous* word. *Polysemous*—I had to look that up, it refers to an unmanageable ambiguity that inadvertently emits more than one meaning. Imagination has been intertwined, at least since Aristotle, with the equally difficult concept of consciousness. (To imagine something is to be, *ipso facto*, conscious of it—even if the wellspring of imaginative creativity is unconscious.)

Much of contemporary theory attempts to define imagination in terms of its capacity to produce mental images, presenting our perceptual experience as the product of imagination. In this capacity, the primary function of imagination is the integration of

sensory input, rendering it meaningful and/or directive—for example, when we see a street sign, say an arrow indicating a curve, our mind, according to this theory, uses imagination to translate the image into meaning, and respond with appropriate action.

This is a far cry from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who coined the maxim, *suspension of disbelief*, and tells us imagination is “*the living power*” the “prime agent of all human perception.”

The study of the imagination is on the rise these days, having found fertile footing for discussion in the field of consciousness studies, but it’s a topic that has been largely avoided, especially by science. Imagination has been a “missing mystery” throughout much of Western philosophical history, implicitly assigned crucial cognitive and epistemological functions, but rarely ever explained.

One contemporary theory equates imagination with simulation, which is to say, our ability to understand and anticipate the thoughts, feelings and actions of others depends upon our ability to imagine how we ourselves would feel and act in the same or similar situation. Neuroscientists have identified “mirror neurons” that fire not only when we perform a certain action, but when we see another perform that same action. If you’ve ever had to hide your eyes at film violence, or felt that ping of electrical empathy when someone around you is injured, or been aroused watching sexual intimacy—mirroring neurons is probably why. And though interesting, this premise is limited since we can imagine something more than the thoughts, feelings and actions of others.

Writing in the late 1990s, British archeologist Steven Mithen argued that imagination is what gave homo sapiens the evolutionary advantage over neanderthals, making it possible for them to drive the neanderthals to extinction despite the fact the older species was better adapted to the European climate (homo sapiens having originated in Africa). In Mithen’s scenario, imagination is equated with cognitive

fluidity. Mithen argues that the neanderthal compartmentalized thinking, while the human could integrate a range of cognitive processes. His “proof” comes from cave drawings, carvings and the like, which only appear on the scene when homo sapiens arrive, using to the creation of art to defend his analysis of sophisticated brain function.

Mithen and his allies contend there are limits to our ability to imagine ourselves into another’s experience. We cannot, for example, accurately imagine what it is to be a hawk in the sky or a spider in its web. But here, we must begin our approach onto the runway of the Romantic Imagination, for it could be, and indeed, *should be* argued that this is precisely the skill of the shape-shifting shaman. Neuroscience does not place value on indigenous science—nor on Coleridge’s philosophical definition from *Biographia Literaria* that defines imagination as a “repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.”

—❧ROMANTIC IMAGINATION❧—

ACCORDING TO THE ROMANTICS, EXPRESSIONS OF CREATIVE GENIUS not only reflect our ability to create new unity out of existing things, but to become one with the source of all, that which brings nonexistence into existence. Romanticism tell us that neither the human, nor human imagination stands apart from Nature, that imagination has been present as the power in Nature from the beginning of creation. Imagination is a force, a capacity, not simply to produce imagery, but to manifest, to visualize or speak into being. *And God said, let there be light: and there was light.* John Keats is credited with some of the most famous—and analyzed—lines about the Romantic Imagination: "I am certain," he says, "of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth

of the Imagination—what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth—whether it existed before or not... The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth." Keats is referring to Milton's, *Paradise Lost*, (VIII, 460-490) where Adam dreams of the creation of Eve, and awakes to find her there.

The Romantic Imagination is not a human capacity, so much as is the human aptitude for experiencing mystical union, or in more secular terminology, aligning oneself with the creativity of the universe. For the Romantic, imagination is the generating force of the universe. William Blake explained it thus: *imagination is the real and eternal world of which this vegetable universe is but a faint shadow*. Romantic Imagination emerges from the nexus of human consciousness and the fertile void that birthed the Big Bang—what religion calls the Divine.

History is littered with the heroes of Romanticism. Its roots are found in Germany with Goethe, Schiller, Schelling and Swiss-born Madame de Staël, and evidence of its clout can be found all over the Western World, all throughout the nineteenth century, and certainly is rite large in the counter-culture movement of the 60s that bloomed right here in San Francisco. Though seldom accepted by mainstream politics, Romanticism is ubiquitous, and always has been. Romanticism encompasses philosophers—Rousseau, Schlegel, Nietzsche; musicians—Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Tchaikovsky; artists—Turner, David, Delacroix, and even scientists and politicians. In fact, I would venture to say that Barack Obama, with his visionary talk of change and hope, has at least one foot in the Romantic paradigm.

But poets stand at the apex of Romanticism. And there's reason: poetry has been seen as the unifier of passion with order. It demands elegance in the same way that scientific equations demand elegance. $E=MC^2$. Historically, the poet was not only the man (and it was men in those days) to solve the riddle of the universe; he was also the

man who understood where it was not solved. As Percy Bysshe Shelley explained in his essay, *A Defense of Poetry*:

A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not.... A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth.... In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves, nor their auditors, are fully aware of the Excellency of poetry, for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness.... No living poet ever arrives at the fullness of his fame...belonging as he does to all time. (pgs.946-948)

My focus of study has been British Romanticism with its constellation of poets: William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats: these were the men of the cannon we studied when I was an undergraduate. These were the men I studied under the rubric of Romantic Literature at Oxford over the summer of 2004. Poets all. With rare exception, whom we did not study were the women of the Romantic era, women we barely know: Mary Robinson, Helen Maria Williams, Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Lamb, Joanna Baillie, Felicia Hemans, Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, to name but a few.

—❧MARY SHELLEY❧—

TO SPEAK OF A NOVELIST AND A WOMAN AS A ROMANTIC was unthinkable fifty years ago, and still remains controversial, though less so today than it was ten, twenty or thirty years ago. Novels, in Britain especially, begin as low-culture creations. They emerged from a kind of National Enquiry milieu, a kiss-and-tell journalism that mixed truth and fiction, while reporting scandal. They were Medieval Romances and storytellers like Chaucer, Boccaccio, and Cervantes, but they weren't considered novelists. Novels were

not part of the educated world; they were market goods. Realistic, but sentimental tellings of human behavior and manners that were often too scandalous for proper society; they weren't literature. A few left their mark, the ones we study today: *Robinson Crusoe*, *Mol Flanders*, *Pamela*, *Tom Jones*. And by the time Mary Shelley undertook the medium—thanks mainly to Goethe in Germany and Walter Scott in Britain—the novel was in transition.

Still, most novels were the equivalent of our modern trash genres: harlequin romances, cheap murder mysteries, horror, sci-fi. In Shelley's day, it was Gothic Romance—which is what *Frankenstein* had generally been labeled. Many novels were written solely to titillate women, which is why in Jane Austen, you find young ladies always being scolded for reading novels; and they would never consider writing one. Austen, herself, published anonymously and hid the fact that she was writing from most of those around her.

It was when just over 190 years ago, January first, 1818 that Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein* in London—anonously. She was 19 years old. *Frankenstein's* publication coincided with her first wedding anniversary. She and Percy Bysshe Shelley, her lover of three and half years, had married on December 30th the year before, twenty days after Shelley's first wife, Harriet, had committed suicide and three months after Mary's half-sister Fanny had done the same. At the time of their marriage Mary Shelley was pregnant with their second child.

Jane Austen might help locate these events in "social time." Austen died, age 42, just months before *Frankenstein* was published. Austen wrote extensively of the social mores of Regency England, most famously in *Pride and Prejudice*. The fact that Mary Shelley ran off with a married man at the age of fifteen and bore a child to him out of wedlock, was no better received in "real" life than it would have been in an Austen

novel. In fact, the young couple's behavior was so scandalous that in March of 1818, two months after *Frankenstein's* publication, the courts, in an unprecedented action, denied Percy Shelley custody of his two children born to his first wife. The official reason was Shelley's atheism—the same allegation used to send him down from Oxford seven years earlier.

Shelley was the son of a baronet. Had he been a character in one of Austen's novels, he most certainly would have been of the Mr. Wickman variety—that is, the dashing, dangerous, young man who all proper young ladies must avoid at all costs. To elope with such a man, as Mary had done in the summer of 1815, running away with him to France, meant not only the end of her social acceptance, but that of her entire family—sisters, especially, would have been imperiled by the scandal, no longer considered marriageable. Austen would have hard-pressed to place Mary Shelley in the social environment of *Pride and Prejudice* in any event.

Mary grew up in the household of her father, William Godwin, a dissenter, a radical, a republican who had supported the politics of the French Revolution, an anarchist, a novelist himself, and penniless book publisher. He had married Mary's mother, the seminal feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft when she was eight months pregnant. Had Austen chosen to portray the Shelleys, she probably would have presented Percy as the brilliant young man of great expectations who squandered his potential on the allure of a totally unacceptable young woman. That's certainly how Shelley's father perceived the matter; he disowned his son and never forgave Mary Shelley. Indeed, the radical William Godwin, who would have had no social standing in Austen's world, and should have known better, refused to speak his daughter and forbade anyone, including Fanny, (the half-sister who committed suicide) to have

contact. My point is that these were two courageous young people making dangerous, unconventional choice on their way to becoming literary legends.

—❧FRANKENSTEIN❧—

I WANT TO TURN MY ATTENTION NOW TO *Frankenstein* as a critique of the masculine bias of Romanticism, which is what I think it is. According to Elizabeth Fay, writing in *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism*:

Critique as a literary form offered women a way to accommodate themselves to Romanticism while differing from the main perspectives that were defining the times. Although women also tried their hand at more mainstream forms, just as the male Romantics did not confine themselves to the extremes of sincerity and irony alone, the most important works by women of the Romantic period take the form of critique. (3-4)

Let me begin with the obvious: The women in *Frankenstein* are alarmingly domestic, absolutely selfless, and ultimately, utterly useless—and Mary Shelley's portrayal of them is purposeful. Her vacant females dramatically demonstrate the nineteenth-century masculine ideal of perfect femininity: they're sweet, endearing, ever-giving and soothing, empty-headed and childish, unquestioningly cooperative, pathologically passive, fundamentally victimized, and thoroughly domesticated. In fact, they die, completely unrealized, destroyed by the culture they so ignorantly and hopefully embrace, victims of the imbalances brought about by an unchallenged masculine ascendancy.

No matter how perfectly (or imperfectly) they manifest the desired feminine stereotype; they meet the same fate. They die prematurely, helplessly invested in a set of cultural norms that leave them utterly disempowered. This is the horror story: *Frankenstein* is ironic, exposing and ridiculing the cultural imbalance between the masculine and feminine. Mary Shelley magnifies the preposterous implications of a world in which only males act as thinking agents—indeed, Victor in creating life alone, is rendering the feminine irrelevant. And, as Elizabeth Fay reminds us, the Romantic period saw “the French Revolution and the resulting political interest in rights, including rights for women... (3-4)”

From the time of its publication, *Frankenstein* was fashionable reading; it became, even in Mary Shelley's lifetime, a popular stage production. From the beginning, however, *Frankenstein's* interpreters, like those who produced film versions in the twentieth century, were men who consistently presented it as a somewhat farcical horror story. These interpreters missed the point; *Frankenstein* is, among other things, a critique of gender imbalance. One of the defining characteristics of *Frankenstein* is its portrayal of the feminine in ironic caricature.

“Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses,” Virginia Woolf writes, “Possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.” She goes on to add that “whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge.”

Victor Frankenstein is filled with good intentions, and in the beginning seems to fit all our expectations for a Romantic hero. We soon see, however, that he's no knight in shining armor returning order to the world. Victor is ineffectual and self-absorbed; he

cannot acknowledge responsibility for the monster he has created. He cannot admit his trespass, and is incapable of recognizing, let alone scrutinizing, the implications of his actions. Mary Shelley does not say it would be nice, decent, fair, moral, ethical, or simply politically correct to treat women as equal partners in life; rather she points ironically and dramatically to the larger dangers inherent in failing to do so.

Frankenstein reveals what happens when a culture is bereft of the power of the true feminine. This then, is Romantic critique behind *Frankenstein*: Shelley uses it to demonstrate that the masculine cannot survive on its own. Masculine and feminine are complementary; they must work together in the same way that our two eyes must work together in order for us to perceive depth.

But, in fact, that is not where her critique ends: Victor Frankenstein is not simply entangled in his narcissistic delusions of grandeur, he accepts cultural norms—that like those of the Enlightenment—elevate him above the rest of humanity, and elevate the human above the rest of creation; norms that fail to realize the magnificence of Nature and its life processes, or of the cosmos that gave rise to Nature, to humanity, and indeed, to Victor himself.

Here then, is the crowning genius of Mary Shelley's insightfulness: her critique of the Romantic does not eliminate her interest in its most radical precept—the role of the imagination. She is not simply a feminist, tossing out her friends under the bus—which is the latest permutation of interpretation that seems to be making the rounds regarding *Frankenstein*. Rather, she shares in the Romanticism of Shelley and Byron. She embraces the Romantic sensibility—in precisely the way she learned it from her father's friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge—believing that imagination is creation: "The living power and prime agent of all human perception... the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am."

Now let us, just for a moment go back to my epigraph, with which I opened this talk. It's taken from my novel, *Requiem for the Author of Frankenstein*. Coleridge is speaking:

“What if you slept? And what if, in your sleep, you dreamed? And what if, in your dream, you went to heaven, and there plucked a strange and beautiful flower? And what if, when you awoke, you had the flower in your hand? Ah, what then?”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge looked up at his audience; there was a collective murmur. It was difficult to say if it was one of approval. He found the eager gaze of Godwin's daughter. Fourteen year-old Mary was enthralled. Well did she remember Coleridge reciting the *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* in her father's house. What happened that night had changed her life, precisely because she had plucked a strange and beautiful flower and awakened to find it in her hand.

Coleridge winked at her. “Imagination,” he said, “owes no allegiance to time or space.”

So, here's my point: The human mind itself is an evolved phenomenon, derivative of something larger than itself. The belief that the human mind is the measure of meaning and intelligence in the universe—an Enlightenment perspective that drove Victor Frankenstein to create his destructive monster, and in fact, still drives most scientific thought today—is fundamentally annihilative and Mary Shelley knew it. She knew, intuitively, that it is essential to our survival as a species and to the survival of our planet that we recognize what Victor Frankenstein failed to grasp. Namely that Romanticism is correct: our human capacity for intelligence, imagination, creativity, ingenuity, love, nurturance, all are derivative expressions of the (intelligence,

imagination, creativity, ingenuity, love and nurturance driving the) evolutionary unfolding of the universe as a whole.

As we awaken to an awareness of these cosmological dynamics, as we come to have some sense of the patterns that for billions of years have supported the ongoing endurance and evolution of existence itself, we would be utter fools (as Victor Frankenstein was an utter fool) not to pay attention. It is sheer hubris not to humble ourselves in awe before that which has (without any strategic planning or ingenuity on our part) given rise to our existence. Human beings are local manifestations of larger, overarching patterns inherent in the universe. Because we can, we are obliged in the truest sense of an authentic, ontological morality, to align ourselves with evolutionary dynamics operative in the universe, in essence to embrace the Romantics Imagination.

In my mind, these two points are intertwined. If we continue to usurp, misinterpret and/or ignore the feminine—choosing instead the imbalance that drove the Enlightenment—given the fragile condition of the planet, we increase the likelihood of disaster. We must recognize the feminine in its difference if we intend to heal the cultural imbalances that are today pushing us toward extinction. The message simply put is this: Achieving authentic gender equity is not simply a noble social goal; it's an evolutionary imperative. Without it, homo sapiens will most likely fail as a species.

The further message is that only imagination can reconcile oppositions. If we are to heal the imbalance we've already created, if we're to recover from the deadly spin that's currently taking us down at an alarming rate, we must engage the imagination at the level the Romanticism names: What Coleridge is insisting upon when he tell us the human imagination, at its highest level, inherits the divine creative energy of the Great I AM of the Old Testament, he's referring to what St. John, in his gospel, named Logos or Word—the common origin, not only of language and consciousness, but of the world

that contains them. Coleridge is telling us that the creative imagination can be applied not only to the creation and meditation of art, but also to the consideration of Nature, and that Like Mary Shelley, we must learn how to wake with flowers in our hands.



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