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Frankenstein

If we examine the prehistory of the figure¹ of the mad scientist, we discover that, though Frankenstein is obviously the modern prototype, and Mary Shelley his² inventor, he had antecedents.

One obvious model, possibly even Shelley's original (scholars are divided) was Johann Conrad Dippel (1673-1734), a German alchemist who was indeed born at Castle Frankenstein, but also — this never fails to crack me up — died at Castle Wittgenstein near Bad Laasphe. It would be hard to contrive a more pleasing symmetry.

In between he was imprisoned for seven years for heresy, claimed secret knowledge of the Philosopher's Stone and the Elixir of Life, and was rumored to have experimented with soul-transference between cadavers, which with charming seventeenth-century naiveté he thought could be accomplished with a funnel. — Now of course we

¹ I would hesitate to call it an archetype, though I suppose it might be derived as it were from first principles, in a descent from the shaman through the legends about Archimedes and Roger Bacon to the alchemists, and thus traced to the development of the figure in the present day; which seems like overkill. — "Topos" at any rate would be more accurate, but the word has been appropriated by the mathematicians, who make much better use of it. "Figure" is anodyne, but will have to do .

² No doubt there is a large and — dare I say it — toxic literature interpreting Faust as a specimen of the pathological masculine, but I have no interest in discovering it; and with regard to the usual presuppositions about gender note only that though there is a longer, deeper, and richer tradition of female exercise of forbidden powers over Nature, for obvious reasons I couldn't have wanted to grow up to be a witch. — Boys will be boys. — Anyway, we all end up burnt at the same stake.

know it would require an ethernet cable at the very least, and probably several thumb drives for auxiliary storage.³

But the even more evident precursor is Franklin; when Shelley subtitles her work “the modern Prometheus” there’s no doubt to whom she must implicitly refer⁴ — the Titan whose daring had captured lightning in a bottle, who had tamed the very wrath of Zeus. This was not simply a stroke of experimental genius, but an act of existential daring whose audacity still leaves us dumbstruck.⁵ — And of course the implicit reference was always clear: why else in the movies are they always flying kites from the castle battlements in a thunderstorm? this detail is not in Shelley, but it really doesn’t have to be; it’s all too obvious.⁶

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As for the idea that the secret of animation was electrical in nature, that came from Galvani, who had produced movement in frogs’ legs by running a current through them. One pictured Michelangelo’s God reaching out to Adam, and between their outstretched fingers passing — the spark of life.

³ Tabloid headline glimpsed in passing in Godard’s *Masculin Féminin* [1966]: “American scientists have sent thoughts from one brain to another by injection.” (This may have been inspired by some experiments with planaria that seemed to show a role for RNA in storing memories, though of course that doesn’t affect the joke.)

⁴ In fact it was Kant who originally called Franklin “the modern Prometheus”, cf. “Continued observations on the earthquakes that have been experienced for some time” [1756].

⁵ Not least because lightning killed many of his imitators. We are free after the fact to admire Franklin’s balls only because he had such phenomenal luck.

⁶ Insofar as any theoretical explanation is offered for Frankenstein’s success in reviving the dead, it reads more like an anticipation of the concept of entropy: he studies the transition from life to death, and then, somehow, sees how to reverse it. — The idea is rather cinematic — he figured out how to run the film backwards — and is explored in just such terms by Peter Greenaway in *Zool/A Zed and Two Naughts* [1985].

The reports of these experiments had, shall we say, an electric effect upon the imaginations of the cognoscenti:

Electrical experiments were an obsession for Percy Bysshe Shelley. During his years as a Cambridge undergraduate he became intoxicated with the promises of science, discoursing with “zealous earnestness” on such matters as the composition of gases, the chemical analysis of food, the generation of heat and galvanic batteries. His biographer and contemporary Thomas Jefferson Hogg describes going to visit him in his rooms and finding him surrounded by apparatus, including an electrical machine which he proceeded to demonstrate, standing on a glass-legged stool and commanding his friend to turn the generator handle “until he was filled with the fluid, so that his long, wild locks bristled and stood on end”.

(Shades of Nikola Tesla!)

Shelley himself said:

What a mighty instrument would electricity be in the hands of him who knew how to wield it, in what manner to direct its omnipotent energies . . . What a terrible organ would the supernal shock prove, if we were able to guide it; how many of the secrets of nature would such a stupendous force unlock!⁷

⁷ Jane Goodall, “Electrical Romanticism,” in *The Norton Critical Edition of Frankenstein*, edited by J. Paul Hunter. [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996.]