Robert Walton As Reanimator

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Since the publication of *Frankenstein* in 1818, scholars and lay readers alike have drawn numerous parallels between Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein—the two young, brilliant, and keenly ambitious explorers of the unknown who narrate the bulk of the novel. Because Walton has long dreamed of uncovering some of nature’s most profound secrets—despite the many attendant risks—and then basking in the personal glory of such discovery, he has often been described unflatteringly. For example, Laura Claridge refers to him as “Victor’s shadow self” (15), calling Walton “a potential Frankenstein, another man [. . .] seeking out ultimate knowledge by conquering the world’s uncharted regions”—at once as ruthless, proud, moody, and self-centered as the frozen scientist he rescues and then comes to admire (23). There is something far more intriguing than mere youth, ambition, intellect, and privileged upbringing, however, to link this pair of headstrong, adventurous twenty-somethings who yearn to sunder the envelope of scientific knowledge and write their names large in the history books: in essence, both young men, not just Victor, are reanimators. Four years prior to his rescue in the Arctic by Walton, Frankenstein had built a man by reinvigorating dead human tissue; in a symbolically parallel tableau, during their short time together aboard ship, Robert Walton becomes the hands-on reanimator of Victor Frankenstein, in effect, bringing him back to sentient life in a dark and private chamber, closely reenacting—but this time in a most positive way—Victor’s earlier gift to the monster of animation.

At the age of seventeen, brimming with optimism and ruled by vainglory, Victor leaves his native Switzerland to attend col-
lege at the University of Ingolstadt in southern Germany. Just two years later, after intense and cloistered study, he discovers the secret to creating life. Still bursting with youthful hubris, Victor then begins to gather the parts with which to construct his new species—the perfect being who will be immune to both death and disease. Although Victor is evasive as to how he actually reanimates his hideous amalgam of lifeless limbs and stilled organs, he offers very specific details about the ominous evening of its birth: “It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet” (Shelley 52). In southern Germany, the weather in November is routinely cold and dreary—providing the perfect Gothic atmosphere for the birth of the most famous monster in all of literature. The symbolic suitability of dark and dismal weather, however, is not the main reason Mary Shelley selected this particular month for the nativity of Victor’s charnel creature.

Rather, November was chosen for its numerical symbolism: according to the old Roman calendar—discarded in the sixteenth century in favor of the more accurate Gregorian—November was the ninth month of the year, not the eleventh. Fittingly, according to Anne Mellor, Victor labors away in secret for precisely “nine months to give birth to his creature” (xii). Therefore, the gestation period for this artificial man—from rough assembly to first breath—is exactly that of a human fetus, nine months, and the birth month selected by Mary Shelley alludes to the same symbolic number. In perfect parallel, Walton’s letters to his sister cover a period of nine months—from one December to the following September. Hence, the gestation time for Walton’s grand adventure in search of personal glory and forbidden knowledge—from its optimistic nascency in Saint Petersburg until its bitter termination upon Victor’s death—covers the same amount of calendar time. Whereas Victor Frankenstein’s
creation (the monster) will ultimately destroy him, however, Robert Walton's “creation” (Victor) will eventually save the life—and soul—of his reanimator.

“In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments,” Victor constructs his unnatural being in what he himself labels “my workshop of filthy creation” (Shelley 49). He tells Walton, “my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs” (52). On that cold and damp creation night, when the monster’s massive chest heaves with the first rasping breath of artificial life, Victor recoils in disgust at the ugly, repulsive thing he has just reanimated from dead flesh: “I had worked hard for [. . .] the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. [. . .] but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (53). Overcome with revulsion at the foulness and deformity of his creation, Victor immediately flees to the bedroom, draws the curtains to his bed, and then collapses in a profound swoon. He trusts that when he awakens, the monster will prove to have been nothing more than a vivid nightmare, a horrifying phantasm precipitated by poor health, poor diet, and a lack of sleep. Victor is disappointed in the extreme, however. His shocking creation—a “technological son” spawned by science gone terribly wrong—is as solid as any flesh born of woman; and he craves succor and warmth, friendship and protection, none of which Victor bothers to provide for him (Kranzler 43).

Because Victor’s profane project “is a very private enterprise, conducted in the shadow of guilt and concealment,” he informs no one of the gruesome thing taking shape in his spare room (Baldick 51). He never tells his unsuspecting mentors, Professors Waldman and Krempe, nor does he inform family, friends, or fellow students. Victor knows that all of them would condemn his unhallowed endeavor to reanimate dead human tissue, so he
sutures in the shadows, keeping his horrible handiwork a dark, Byronic secret. At bottom, he is ashamed of what he is doing, and he fully comprehends the enormity of his sin, yet still the “egotistical, self-absorbed Victor” studies, labors, and lives in isolation in this desperate quest “to become God, to become the creator of life and the gratefully worshiped father of a new species of immortal beings” (Mellor xv-xvi). In dim and fetid solitude, steeped in the stench of death, Victor thus assembles and then reanimates the rancid flesh and decayed bone he has stolen in the blackness of night from sepulchers and fresh graves, from charnel houses and dissection rooms.

According to Walton, when Victor is first rescued and hoisted aboard the ship, he is little more than a skeleton held together by rotted rags—putrid, foul, ugly, and disgusting, just barely recognizable as a fellow human being. In short, Victor looks very much like an exhumed corpse: “His limbs were nearly frozen, and his body dreadfully emaciated by fatigue and suffering. I never saw a man in so wretched a condition. We attempted to carry him into the cabin; but as soon as we had quitted the fresh air, he fainted” (Shelley 15). By working feverishly on the unconscious and seemingly dead stranger, Walton finally restores him to life “by rubbing him with brandy, and forcing him to swallow a small quantity” (15). Just as Victor—four years earlier—had to embrace the cold, dead flesh of the creature in order to bring animation to his rigor-stiffened limbs, Walton must likewise caress the naked, clammy flesh of Victor in order to infuse his stiffened limbs with life-giving warmth. After this alcoholic aqua vitae treatment is successful at bringing the comatose stranger back to semi-consciousness, Walton then wraps him in wool blankets, places him “near the chimney of the kitchen stove,” and there, “by slow degrees,” Victor Frankenstein is reanimated and reborn, is rescued from the white oblivion of a hypothermic death (15).

Although once again conscious, two full days pass before Victor can utter so much as a single syllable to Walton. This epi-
sode closely echoes the original muteness of the monster when, four years before, he was first brought to life and tried in vain to speak to the man who had made him: the creature’s “jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken but I [Victor] did not hear” (Shelley 53). When Victor could pronounce words again, Walton says, “I removed him to my own cabin, and attended to him as much as my duty would permit” (15). In such a way, just like Victor, Walton constructs, indeed reanimates, his “creature” in a closed and private chamber, doing all of the intimate labor himself by the dim light of oil and candle: feeding, attending, massaging, soothing. Unlike Victor, he does all this in private not out of fear, guilt, or shame, but from genuine concern. He carefully shields the shattered, grotesque Victor from the press of the curious—and superstitious—sailors:

When my guest was a little recovered, I had great trouble to keep off the men, who wished to ask him a thousand questions; but I would not allow him to be tormented by their idle curiosity, in a state of body and mind whose restoration evidently depended upon entire repose. (15)

Even when Victor regains a modicum of strength and asks to go up on deck, Walton declares, “I have persuaded him to remain in the cabin, for he is far too weak to sustain the rawness of the atmosphere” (16).

When, after many days of careful nursing, Victor can finally utter complete, coherent sentences, he offers profound thanks to his rescuer, his reanimator: “‘[You] have benevolently restored me to life’” (Shelley 16, emphasis added). Assuming the duties of a protective father-creator figure, Walton asserts complete guardianship over this fragile, helpless, and bewildered “creature” (one of his favorite pet terms for Victor, used here affectionately as opposed to Victor’s constant pejorative use of the same title for his own creation). Upon observing this strange Arctic sojourner for a time, Walton announces, “I never saw a more interesting creature: his eyes have generally an expression of wildness, and even madness” (15). Then, as the days pass and
Walton continues his medical ministrations, “a new spirit of life animated the decaying frame of the stranger” (16, emphasis added). After plenty of hot soup and warm attention, Walton declares that he can, at last, see Victor’s skeletal arm “raised in animation,” while the sallow, shrunken countenance of the stranger glows, becomes “irradiated” by the return of the life force (21, emphasis added).

In *The Endurance of Frankenstein*, Ellen Moers argues that “Mary Shelley’s book is most interesting, most powerful [. . .] in the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences” (81). Indeed, declaring that “birth is a hideous thing in *Frankenstein*,” Moers labels the entire novel “a phantasmagoria of the nursery” (87). In his feeble and wasted state when first rescued from the ice fields, Victor clearly represents newly-formed creation; he is a wet, gruesome, and helpless thing, a dull mass of still and silent flesh awaiting a spark of life. But the infantile Victor—in marked contrast to how he treats his own creation—will be protected and fathered by a gentle soul who eagerly assumes the daunting duties that come with delivering a new life into the world. “He must have been a noble creature in his better days, being now in wreck,” laments Walton (17). But he, unlike Victor, does not turn away from such ugliness, does not reject a fellow being on the basis of deformity or disfigurement, nor does he suffer from what Moers labels “the trauma of the afterbirth” (81). In short, there is no post-partum depression in Robert Walton.

Indeed, ever the perfect Samaritan, Walton is the only character in the entire novel who does not flee or tremble in horror when first confronted by the monster face to face. In part, of course, he stays because Victor has warned him in advance about the creature’s immense size and grotesqueness. Of much greater import, however, is the simple fact that Walton has a superior heart. The brave and well-armed Captain refuses to murder the monster on sight as Victor had made him swear to do. Instead, when he finally confronts the creature he has heard so much
about, Walton experiences an odd “mixture of curiosity and compassion,” and so, in the end, he cannot bring himself to use his sword (Shelley 242). In an act of humanity and grace, Walton listens to the monster’s tale of woe and then allows the forlorn creature to escape the ship unmolested, does not cry out an alarm that would bring a host of musket-wielding sailors rushing to his cabin to attack the gigantic and pitiful misfit.

Without the selfless ministering of Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein would die a cold, solitary, Bartleby-style death: he would remain an unread letter, an unsolved riddle. The transcendent moral message of his tragic and ultimately self-destructive life would remain forever undelivered. Victor would end up a frozen anomaly trapped in pack ice at the North Pole, his corpse discovered centuries later perhaps, its profound human lesson no longer decipherable. In the end, Robert Walton is redeemed, is saved from physical and spiritual destruction by his own kind and virtuous actions toward Victor Frankenstein as well as by his subordination—bitter though it may be—of personal dreams of glory in order to save the crew, his extended family, who view him “as a surrogate parent who will not fail them” (Claridge 24). Walton even goes against the dying wishes of Victor, who, against all compassion and good sense, exhorts Walton to continue the dangerous voyage toward forbidden knowledge regardless of the human costs: “I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed” (Shelley 240).

These are Victor’s last audible words, and they reveal his astonishing lack of love. By uttering such sentiments, he turns away from all that he has learned through his many years of suffering and grief and loss; thus, Victor dies unrepentant, unredeemed. He still clings stubbornly to his belief in the omnipotence of science and the grandeur of human ambition. He cannot bring himself to give up the quest—even though it has slain him. The faint smile that crosses Victor’s lips as he draws his final breath may be nothing more than the wan smirk of a damned fool, not the serene smile of a man who has at last found grace. As he
sinks back upon the pillow in Walton’s bunk, he struggles once “again to speak, but [he is] unable” (Shelley 240). What addendum Victor wishes to make to his last words remains a delicious and permanent mystery. Perhaps, Hamlet-like, he wishes to yet again change his mind and warn Walton away from ambition and glory, or perhaps not. What is clear, however, is that Walton—by rejecting the high price of Faustian fame—ignores Victor’s last request and instead chooses life for himself and for his crew. According to Matthew Brennan in *The Gothic Psyche*, because of his time spent with Victor, Walton is “ready to change and grow psychologically, ready to increase consciousness” (70) as well as to accept the many “limits and responsibilities” that come with true manhood (72). Their discussions in the cramped cabin, Brennan argues, represent “a successful meeting with the shadow that leads to greater self-awareness and selflessness” (69). So it is not really the fear of a mutiny that prompts Walton to turn the ship around and give up on his lifelong dream of discovering the fabled northwest passage through the treacherous Arctic. It is rather his own humanity—as demonstrated in his hands-on animation of the repulsive, dying thing named Victor Frankenstein—that makes him turn the ship southward toward warmth and home and family.

During one of their early conversations, Robert Walton explains how he longs for a close friend, an intellectual confidant, someone to play Johnson to his Boswell: “I spoke of my desire of finding a friend, of my thirst for a more intimate sympathy with a fellow mind than had ever fallen to my lot, and expressed my conviction that a man could boast of little happiness who did not enjoy this blessing” (Shelley 18-19). Upon hearing these sentiments, Victor enthusiastically declares, “‘[W]e are unfashioned creatures, but half made up, if one wiser, better, dearer than ourselves—such a friend ought to be—do not lend his aid to perfectionate our weak and faulty natures’” (19). Contrary to the more negative view taken by Laura Claridge and others, that “wiser, better, dearer” man is clearly Captain Robert Walton. By
reanimating with his own hands a frozen, comatose stranger, by
restoring human life to stiffened limbs and gelid veins, Walton
completes and “perfectionates” Victor for a short while, filling
his last few days with the affection and comradeship that en-
able the tortured wanderer to expire with a devoted—if newly
made—friend by his bedside. The desiccated, cadaverous thing
that Walton finds on the ice and brings back to consciousness
finally expires, but he does not die alone or in vain. In the end,
Victor Frankenstein, the original reanimator, saves the very man
who reanimates him—if only for a few short weeks—with the
precious spark of life.

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