

Marie Lathers

Critical Paper

Peter Ackroyd, *The Casebook of Dr. Frankenstein*, Doubleday, 2008

Peter Ackroyd's novels are usually revisions and re-tellings: in most of them, he rewrites authors' lives—sometimes including revisions of their literary works—in an often entertaining and imaginative recreation of literary history. His novels not “historical fiction,” because too much of them is fiction, but they play with history, and in particular the history of London, the setting of most of the novels. The (re)invented lives of authors and their reimagined literary works sometimes intersect, as if the fictional characters were walking the streets of London and interacting with authors, yielding sometimes witty commentary on literary classics. Ackroyd also expands the circles of well-known authors to include other cultural figures, creating imagined connections between literary, artistic, and even—as in our novel—scientific figures of the time period at hand. That time period is usually the 17th, 18th, or 19th century, with the Romantic era being one of Ackroyd's favorites. *The Casebook of Dr. Frankenstein* is an intertwining of a classic Romantic text, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* of 1818, and the real or fanciful adventures and misadventures of the great poets of English Romanticism: Percy Bysshe Shelley (Bysshe), Lord Byron, and even—sort of—John Keats.

Ackroyd has published eighteen novels, beginning with *The Great Fire of London*, which appeared in 1982. His third novel, *Hawksmoor* (1985) is considered his best. It is unusual in Ackroyd's oeuvre because it concerns not historical literary figures, but also historical architects. Of the four Ackroyd novels that I've read over the last thirty years—*The Casebook* makes the fifth—*Hawksmoor* was certainly my favorite, and I highly recommend it. It is denser and quite a bit more challenging than *The Casebook*, and it is Ackroyd's best-reviewed novel. In it,

Ackroyd invents the character of Nicholas Hawksmoor, a 19th-century London detective.

Hawksmoor investigates a series of murders at various London churches that were designed by the real 18th-century architect Nicholas Dryer, assistant to Christopher Wren. If the architecture of London or merely a good who-dunnit would interest you, you will love *Hawksmoor*.

The next Ackroyd book that I read was *Chatterton*, published in 1987. Thomas Chatterton was a real pre-Romantic poet who committed suicide at the age of seventeen, in 1770. Ackroyd imagines that Chatterton left behind a confessional manuscript in which he confessed that his death was faked. He further imagines that Chatterton continued to publish poetry under pseudonyms, one of them William Blake.

Milton in America, published in 1996, was not as enjoyable for me, and the book did not receive very positive reviews. In it, the author of *Paradise Lost* journeys to America, where he heads up a group of Puritans. The fictional Milton and every Puritan portrayed are ghastly human beings: intolerant, cruel, violent. There's no one to like in this novel. The point appears to be that the American project (a sort of "Paradise Regained") is a failure. Perhaps the novel is indeed worth reading, given the current situation in our country.

I have also read *The Lambs of London*, published in 2004. This book, like *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton*, successfully incorporates pastiche, intertextuality, and metafiction, postmodern techniques often used by Ackroyd. In it, Charles and Mary Lamb discover a "lost" Shakespeare play and have it performed in London in the early 19th century. I won't reveal to you whether the play is a true recovered play or a forgery.

Now we come to *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*, published in 2008. This novel received very negative reviews in Britain. (Americans, perhaps still mourning our paradise lost, were more favorable.) After almost forty years of Ackroyd's writing—and almost twenty

published novels—many critics across the pond have had enough. I decided to put these review quotations up front in my paper instead of at the end so that you can see how strong the reaction was to the novel—maybe you had similar reactions to it.

The Guardian reviewer was absolutely scathing. Ackroyd's earliest novels were the best, he states; since then, they have become formulaic. Ackroyd "has been writing the same book for much too long," and this one is "perhaps the most feeble yet." The plot is predictable, as is the setting—Ackroyd has, no surprise, moved Dr. Frankenstein to London. The recreation of the monster as "Jack Keat" is a poor decision, but worst of all is that this novel lacks any inkling of the terror and seriousness of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Instead, Ackroyd employs narrative tricks and clichés, including the "it was all a dream"-style dénouement, which rips off *Jekyll and Hyde* but without adding anything new. The book is so clichéd that "the theme of doubleness [can] exert no force." In conclusion, the reviewer writes, "At the start of his novel-writing life, Ackroyd made postmodern, London-based historical novels seem at once daring and fun . . . But, like Victor Frankenstein, he is now being overwhelmed by the thing he made."

The New York Times review was, by contrast, mostly positive. For the reviewer, Ackroyd's choice of a scientist—Dr. Frankenstein—as embodiment of the Romantic era, instead of a poet or painter (although of course Bysshe Shelley plays a key role), is felicitous. Instead of comparing *The Casebook* to Shelley's *Frankenstein* and finding the former lacking, the reviewer compares *The Casebook* to modern interpretations of *Frankenstein*—presumably the film and theater versions—and states, "Ackroyd does the *Frankenstein* mythology a tremendous service by restoring its intellectual weight, its emotional gravitas, its air of tragic idealism. His Frankenstein is Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, to the life." What this reviewer admires is that Ackroyd reminds us that Shelley's Victor Frankenstein was a serious and deeply feeling man,

not the clownish mad scientist of most of the film versions. While the reviewer calls *The Casebook* “intelligent,” though, he has trouble finding “an idea that isn’t already burning, fiercely, in Mary Shelley’s vital novel.” His one criticism of *The Casebook* is that Ackroyd offers nothing really new, rendering the novel more or less “futile.”

There are several layers to the relationship between history and fiction in Ackroyd’s novels. In *The Casebook*, Ackroyd recreates, at times quite loosely, historical figures of the period during which Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, including Bysshe, Lord Byron, Mary Shelley, and scientists Dr. Polidori, Humphry Davy and John Hunter, among others. Adding scientist characters is an inventive move, and we learn something about early nineteenth-century understandings of electricity and energy. In Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, there is a second scientist figure aside from Victor. Robert Walton is the Arctic explorer who finds the monster and Victor Frankenstein in the far North and listens to Victor recount the story of making the creature. But science fails in Shelley’s novel when, not only as concerns the monster, but also in Walton’s decision to abandon his pursuit of knowledge and return home. It’s not clear in Ackroyd’s telling what we are to make of the value of science, although throughout the novel there is an attempt to create parallelisms between science and art, or poetry.

Perhaps the most liberties taken in terms of a historical figure of this milieu are with Harriet and Daniel Westbrook. Harriet, Bysshe’s first wife, did drown in the Serpentine, but she committed suicide and her brother was not executed. Nor was she a working class factory girl whom Shelley “rescued” and educated. I found what Ackroyd does with these historical figures to be interesting, especially as he mixes Harriet and Daniel’s story with Mary Shelley’s story of William and Justine in her novel. You will recall that Victor Frankenstein’s young brother, William, is killed by the vengeful monster, who then places William’s locket in Justine—the

maid's—pocket. Thus, Justine is identified as the murderer. Victor, fully aware that his creation is responsible, attends the trial and Justine's execution. Ackroyd rewrites this by intertwining it with Harriet's Westbrook's suicide, giving her real-life brother Daniel the role earlier played by Justine.

Perhaps the most unconvincing and even annoying recreations of historical figures are those of Lord Byron, Dr. Polidori, and John Keats. All seems very rushed in the chapters in Switzerland. Byron appears rather briefly, seemingly because someone needs to represent the mad poet, a pendant to the mad scientist. Polidori appears at first to be there merely to talk about the myth of the golem, although he does play a necessary role at the end when he reveals to Victor that there is no monster but the one within. I would have been more satisfied if this had role had been filled at the end by a more developed character—by Mary, or perhaps Bysshe. And the name John Keat, the tubercular student who dies and revives as the monster, seems a bit of a cheap play on Keats, in a reference that doesn't go anywhere. Bysshe, I think, is the most successful recreation of the historical figures. We see the range of his intelligence, as he speaks of religion, politics, philosophy and science, as well as poetry. I believe that we are meant to understand Victor as “insanely” jealous of Bysshe—he wants Bysshe to be his double, he wants to be as talented as Bysshe.

The second layer is the creation of a fictional biography of Victor Frankenstein, that is, one that diverges from Mary Shelley's creation of him. The third layer is the monster himself, different from Mary Shelley's creation to the point where he is not even a real monster, but a figment of Victor's imagination, or madness. Indeed, Ackroyd kills off Mary Shelley's monster, the most original and affecting aspect of her novel *Frankenstein*, by turning him into a

doppelganger of Victor. Whether or not someone can or should try to outdo Mary Shelley by explaining her monster away as a figment of Victor's imagination is a question to consider.

Indeed, why rewrite *Frankenstein* at all? To be merely amusing, or is there something more serious here that *The Guardian* reviewer failed to see? Does adding science to poetry and mixing, as Ackroyd does, yield a more intriguing or affecting story? Does the scientific explanation, which did not concern Mary Shelley, really matter? How are science and the arts related, in terms of how they are produced in the human mind, or human imagination? Is scientific inspiration akin to poetic inspiration? Is the imagination at the root of all ideas, no matter the domain? Is the atheist (in the form of Bysshe) comparable to the scientist, who, whether or not he is himself an atheist, manipulates creation, including manipulating life forms (even human forms)? Is Ackroyd merely trying to entertain, or is there something deeper going on?

It is revealing that instead of focusing on author Mary Shelley, Ackroyd chooses the historical figure of Percy Blysshe Shelley to reimagine, making the poet a friend of Victor Frankenstein. And although Ackroyd does not go so far as to completely erase Mary Shelley from the history of the novel *Frankenstein*—she is in residence at Lake Geneva with the others—he does usurp the novel from her, presenting it not as a creation of her mind but as a true story emerging, in some sense at least, from the mind of Bysshe. This is why Ackroyd makes sure not to allow Mary to tell her invented tale in *The Casebook*—she is interrupted by the men, and then decides to keep the tale to herself until she has thought about it further.

Rather than resurrecting Mary Shelley as a significant creator in *The Casebook*, Ackroyd makes Bysshe's friendship with Victor the origin point for both the story and Victor's urge to create a man. Victor comes to England instead of Ingolstadt to study, putting him smack dab in

the middle of English Romanticism, making of him a sort of British romantic himself. With Ackroyd standing in as Mary Shelley—he has taken over authorship of Victor’s story—Victor is the center of things, to the point where he is, he must be, even the monster himself. In other words, Ackroyd not only kills Mary, but also kills her monster: we learn at the end that the monster does not exist in and of himself (he is merely a reflection of Victor), just as Ackroyd pushes Mary aside to prepare the way for Bysshe to come to the forefront. For the monster is not Victor’s only double—throughout the book, there are hints that he and Bysshe are connected, with Bysshe as the poet and Victor as the scientist, the two sides of the intellectual/imagination coin. At moments, it seems that Victor is jealous of Bysshe, and several times Bysshe is identified as the true “creator” in the text, as when he has a child with Harriet. It is Bysshe who actually creates another human being.

Are we to interpret this displacement of Mary as a nod to one writer’s proposal that Bysshe in fact wrote *Frankenstein*—not *contributed* to it, but *wrote* it? I think not, for this theory has been adequately debunked. Bysshe did write the preface to *Frankenstein*, but this was admitted by Mary. The novel is hers. So why does Ackroyd wrest it from her and give it to Bysshe and Victor Frankenstein, in an ironic move that positions Victor’s monster as himself, and Mary’s monster as Victor’s creation—her creation creates himself, in other words. Ackroyd could have chosen to have Victor Frankenstein meet Mary Shelley but, well, he didn’t.

Overall, a reading of Ackroyd’s novel through this lens—as a combination of characters from the Shelleys’ lives and Mary Shelley’s fictional characters—is perhaps the most rewarding aspect of *The Casebook*. Not only do the deaths pile up, as a result, but the monsters are everywhere. I was particularly struck by how Ackroyd, drawing on biographers of Byron, presents Byron himself as a monster: a domineering, uncaring, and physically intimidating poet

obsessed with his own worth, ego, and singularity. (In this way, though, he is distinct from Victor's "monster," who feels his singularity as an aching loneliness).

Finally, were you surprised at the end of Ackroyd's novel? I will admit that I was. Although I didn't really buy the idea that the monster was impossible to destroy, presented without any real attempt at scientific explanation. Why doesn't Victor just shoot him full of bullets? Hang or behead him? Anything to stop the murders. Is insisting that the monster is somehow indestructible a clue that Victor is the monster?

There are hints here and there in *The Casebook* that Victor and his monster are the same person; but there are also signs that they *can't* be the same person. An example of the former is in Chapter Three, just after Victor hears Humphry Davy talk about James McPherson's galvanization of a human being. Here is Victor's state of mind as he subsequently runs through the streets, "I might have been fleeing from someone, or something, but the nature of my pursuer was not known to me. Was it an episode of madness? I may even have looked over my shoulder on one or two occasions . . . I had the most curious notion that someone else was running beside me . . . It was some image, some phantasm" (26-27). Later that same evening he "returns to himself" and feels a sense of "resignation" and "acceptance" that he has been "marked out" for something" (27-28). Thus, the beginning of Victor's madness corresponds to his first hearing of the possibility of animating a corpse. But quite a few moments that foreshadow Victor's statues as the monster. But there are also moments where it is hard to explain away the monster as Victor's imaginary double, when Victor and the monster are visible to others at the same time. For example, in Chapter Fifteen, Godwin, Mary, Bysshe, and Byron are in a boat when Bysshe sees something. "I thought something reared its head and then went under the water," he says. An otter, Godwin says, to which Bysshe replies, "It did not seem to be an otter. It was too big.

Too awkward . . . it was as if something had gone down to the bottom leaving its wake behind.”

This is right before Martha’s body is found, so Bysshe must have seen the monster. But Victor is in the boat, so it can’t be him.

All in all, I enjoyed *The Casebook*, and it made me go back and re-read *Frankenstein*, which outdoes Ackroyd’s novel on all accounts, but that is not a fair criticism. *The Casebook* is fun and opens new avenues of thinking of Shelley’s horror story, although I’m sure she herself knew that the worst monsters of the world lie deep inside ourselves.