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COMENIUS

Vorstellung von / Presentation of
Frankensteins Tochter/ Frankenstein´s Daughter

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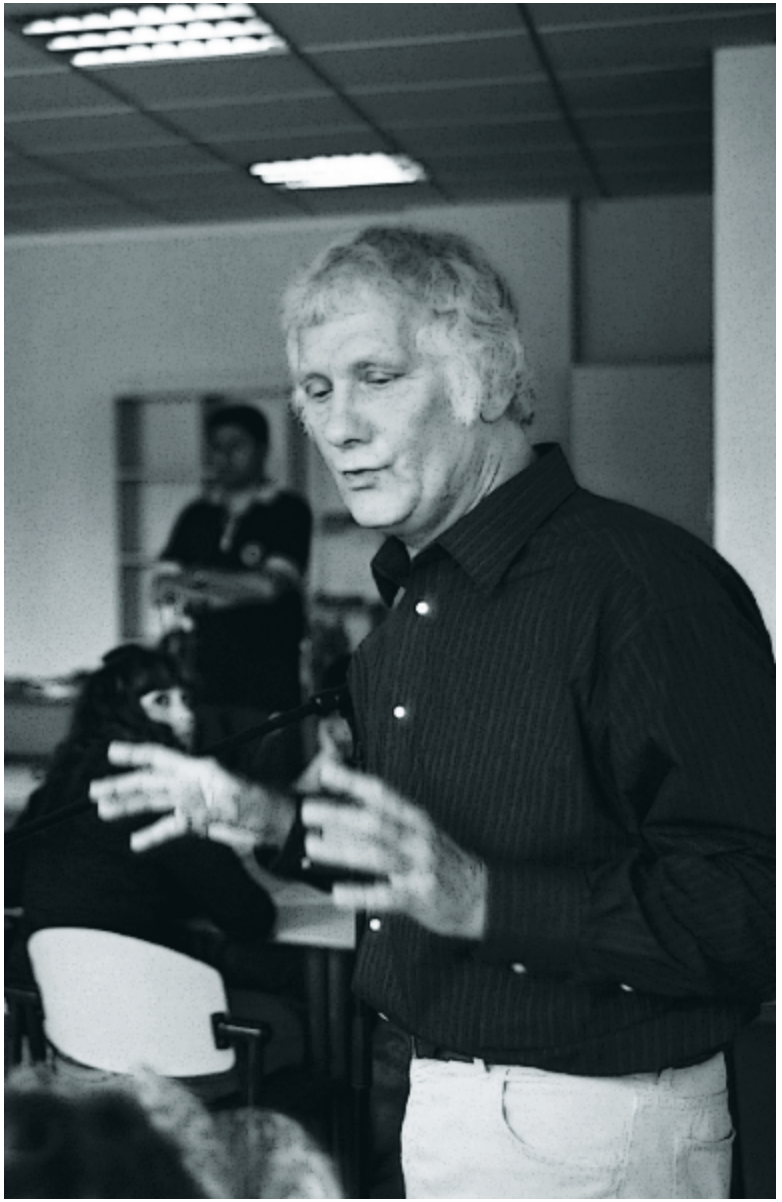
In der Aula der Integrierten Gesamtschule Mutterstadt
Einleitung / Introduction

by Michael Gassenmeier

Initiative iB

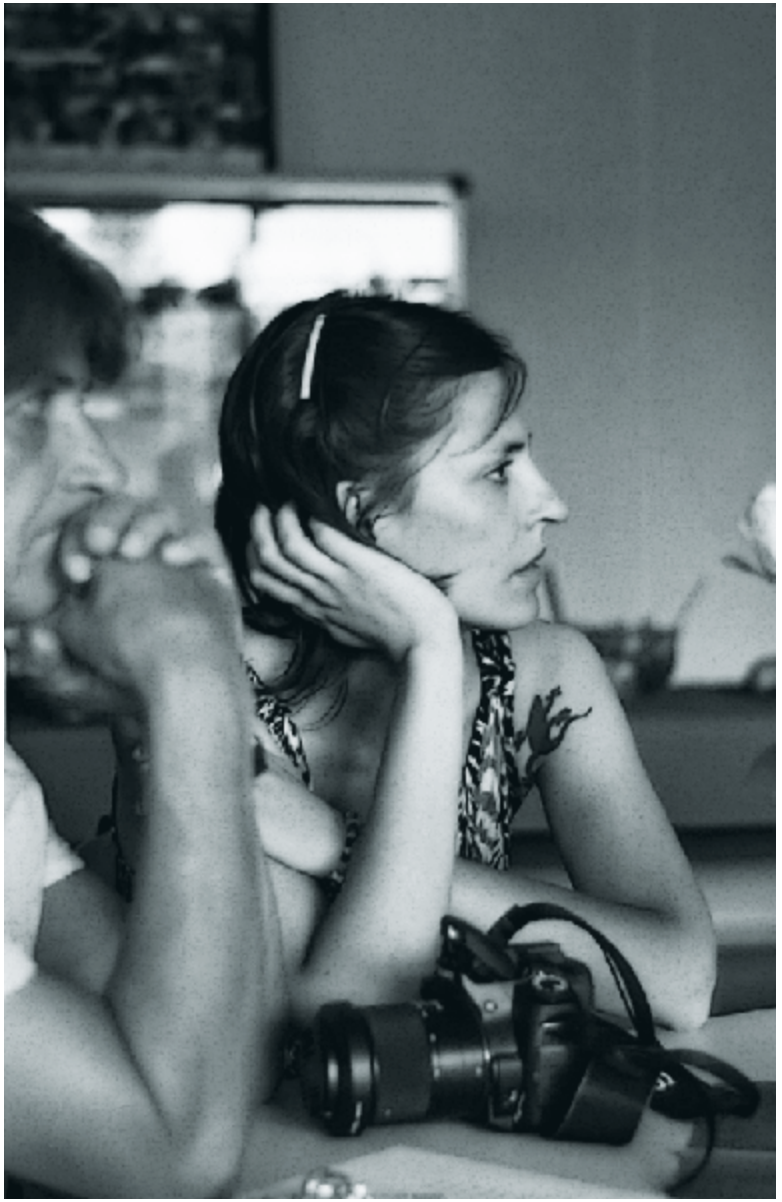
Mary Shelley´s ›Frankenstein‹:

an ideal choice for introducing the pupils of three nations
to the witchcraft of reading and the art of writing



In traditional narratives like the epics of Homer and Virgil or the great novels of the nineteenth century the intelligibility and clearness of characters, situations and perspectives is warranted by the so called third person narrator, an omniscient observer and mediator who, standing on the threshold between the world of fiction and the reality of author and reader, keeps his spatial, temporal, and psychological distance from the world he presents. But in his comments and digressions he never fails to indicate that he can survey, interpret, and evaluate the agents and events of the world he renders with sovereign mastery.

Such an omniscient narrative figure whose unchallenged competence guaranties a far reaching unambiguity of the literary world is not to be found in Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein. In handbooks and histories of British literature, Frankenstein is classified as a fictitious autobiography, a so called first person novel, in which the lives and sufferings of Victor Frankenstein and his monstrous creature are conveyed in the letters and diaries of Robert Walton, a young man more ambitious than experienced who – motivated by Coleridge's famous poem The Ancient Mariner to explore the North Pole – risks both his wealth and his life after having come into a considerable inheritance.



At closer inspection, however, it becomes obvious that the narrative technique applied in Frankenstein differs significantly from that of the established first person novel, too. While autobiographical narrators of that type, despite their confessed subjectivity, present and comment upon not only their own lives but also the lives of their fellow human beings in plausible and reliable terms, Mary Shelley's narrator Robert Walton fails to draw a reasonably non-controversial portrait of himself and of Victor Frankenstein and his monstrous creature. In his letters addressed to his "beloved sister" that form the prologue of the novel he unwittingly exposes his lack of aptitude for his pursuit by lamenting about "my youth having passed in solitude" and "my best years spent under your gentle and feminine fosterage [which have] so refined the groundwork of my character that I cannot overcome an intense distaste to the brutality exercised on board ship." And in the letters to his sister forming the epilogue of the novel he idealizes Frankenstein as naively as he vilifies the Monster and eventually suspects that his "mad schemes are the cause of having been blasted in his hopes" and having proved a complete failure as an explorer of the North Pole. In the parts of the novel which are set between his letters at the beginning and those at the end, Robert Walton abandons his role as an autobiographical narrator and reduces his function to that of a mere recorder. In chapters 1 to 10 and in chapters 18 to 24 he merely takes down and spells out — like a secretary in an office or a clerk at court — the first person account of Victor Frankenstein who in search of his monstrous creature ends up twice on deck of Walton's ship which is sticking fast in the middle of the North Pole. And in chapters 11 to 17 which are, as it were, sandwiched between the two accounts of Frankenstein, Walton reproduces the monster's first person rendering of his sufferings and humiliations which Frankenstein had told him in "the monster's own words" after listening to his creature that had stopped him on the glacial ice of the Mont Blanc urging him to "not deny me my request".

Writing her novel in this manner, Mary Shelley produces an unparalleled modification of the first person novel: i.e. a multiple variation of the type in which the reader is confronted not with one but with three autobiographical narrators: in the first and in the last epistolary part of the book with the intriguingly naive, self-conceited and prejudiced explorer Robert Walton; in the centre of the novel with Frankenstein (chapters 1 to 10), with the monster (chapters 11 to 17) and with Frankenstein again (chapters 18 to 24) where creator and creature describe and explain their respective nightmarish experiences from their entirely subjective perspective. Consequently the accounts of the three autobiographical narrators are found to be almost incompatible with one another: Walton merely parrots sentimental and heroic cliches; Frankenstein retrospectively accuses himself of deserving "eternal hell" because he "aspired to omnipotence [when] he conceived the idea and executed the creation of a man"; and the monster rejects Frankenstein's accusations by persuasively arguing: "You, my creator, would tear me to pieces and triumph [...] I am malicious because I am miserable".

Last but not least, the equal status of the creator's and the creature's controversial accounts is underlined by the contradictory message of the "Author's Introduction" which largely re-echoes Frankenstein's confessional point of view and the "Preface" written by Mary's husband P. B. Shelley which re-echoes the Monster's accusatory perspective. In the face of this dialectic of opinions, affirmations and negations the readers are provoked to weigh up for themselves and without the help of any superior commentator the plausibility and credibility of the rival-narrators' version of the horrifying dilemma. And learning to form their own judgement they may become independent and unprejudiced interpreters not only of the ominous disaster with which Mary Shelley had held reading publics spellbound ever since the publication of her novel almost 200 years ago but also of the better part of modernist writing for the understanding of which reading and discussing Frankenstein is an ideal prelude and preparation. "Instead of moving steadily forward", Robert Martin Adams has convincingly argued, "the reader of modern fiction reads back and forth, comparing, contrasting, analysing and reassessing his response to what he understood one way when it was first presented but now must see it in a 'different light'".

This is what the pupils of the three nations Germany, Spain, and Turkey have discovered and learned to apply. But they achieved much more: with the joy of reading and the pleasure of competing to interpret literature they experienced, as their continuation of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein clearly shows, an initial and a growing passion for writing also without which a literary team-work like Frankenstein's Daughter could not have been realized. To see it realized is to witness no small triumph for the pupils and the teachers who worked on the project. For Regina Philipp, Integrierte Gesamtschule Mutterstadt, the chief coordinator of the project who shouldered a world of work and responsibility from autumn 2007 to summer 2009 with unparalleled commitment and enthusiasm the result is a major trophy and a beautiful and lasting reward.