The Thing That Would Not Die

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ABSTRACT

Today debate rages about the problematic impact of science on society in issues such as assisted dying, multiple pregnancies, fetal reduction, gene therapy, designer babies and resuscitation refusal. We may consider them questions of the moment but they are not as modern as we might assume. Older texts can assist us in the search for answers on these subjects and mirror our modern doubts and fears. In particular three texts: Frankenstein, R. U. R. (Rossum’s Universal Robots), and Brave New World. Although they were written decades ago they continually illuminate society’s apprehension about science and scientists.

The first, Frankenstein, was written by Mary Shelley in 1818. Shelley wrote about a young scientist who wishes to defeat death by reviving the deceased. The next book, R. U. R., is a play written by Czech author and political activist Karel Capek in 1923. Capek uses science fiction to point out contemporary issues which occupied him. Topics such as human prosperity, justice, and quality of life on our planet, are examined through dealing with subjects such as industrialization and its waste, labor management, and human follies and emotions. Brave New World, the dystopic novel written in 1930 by Aldous Huxley describes a futuristic world where humans are manufactured in an assembly. Family, history, creativity, knowledge and love have been eliminated from culture and death has become insignificant.

In these three books the authors emphasize the shortcomings of scientific attempts to solve issues relating to the creation and termination of life. We the readers are left with an image of scientists as deranged, morally repugnant people, who act without responsibility or thought. Writers, on the other hand, use art, imagination, and care. They recognize the fact that humans are more than just a mechanical assembly of certain chemicals which react with one another. Artists may imitate God but they do not try to perfect or rival divine creation.

"Farewell! I leave you, and in you the last of humankind whom these eyes will ever behold. Farewell, Frankenstein! If thou wert yet alive and yet cherished a desire of revenge against me it would be better satiated in my life than in my destruction. But it was not so; thou didst seek my extinction, that I might not cause greater wretchedness; and if yet in some mode unknown to me, thou hadst not ceased to think and feel, thou wouldst not desire against me a vengeance greater than that which I feel." (Shelley 211)

RADIUS: "Slaughter and domination are necessary if you want to be like men. Read history, read the human books. You must dominate and murder if you want to be like men. We are powerful, sir. Increase us and we shall establish a new world. A world without flaws. A world of equality. Canals from pole to pole. A new Mars. We have read books. We have studied science and the arts. The robots have achieved human culture."

ALQUIST: "Nothing is more strange to man than his own image, Oh, depart, depart. If you desire to live, breed like animals."

(Capek 94)

"Because our world is not the same as Othello’s world. You can’t make flivvers without steel — and you can’t make tragedies without social instability. The world’s stable now. People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can’t get. They’re well off; they’re safe; they’re never ill; they’re not afraid of death; they’re blissfully ignorant of passion and old age; they’re plagued with no mothers or fathers; they’ve got no wives or children, or..."
lovers to feel strongly about; they're so conditioned that they practically can't help behaving as they ought to behave. And if anything should go wrong, there's soma. Which you go and chuck out the window in the name of liberty, Mr. Savage. Liberty!" He laughed.

(Huxley 226)

Human creativity is invariably pitted against mortality because wrestling with the quest to control life and death is forever imbedded in our creative nerve paths. All cultures construct a mythology whose purpose is not only to explain where we came from but also where we go to. In the Western tradition we observe how Adam and Eve were created into a world built to serve them. Their operating instructions stated first what they must never do: they were forbidden two elements that stood at the secret center of Eden, knowledge and immortality. Next they were told what they must do: they were commanded to be fruitful and multiply, thus replicating themselves to leave behind a physical legacy. Thus in Eden and for ever after in the Western canon, birth and death were tied together and knowledge stood between them.

But the pursuit of knowledge takes more than one form. In the non-material realm we attempt to understand this phenomenon and control it through the creative expression of our imaginations, some of which has been channelled into the institution of religion. In the realm of empirical knowledge we try to overpower the sentence of vanishing through self perpetuation and the solid proof we leave behind in our inherited genes and our grand monuments. The sentence of death is terrifyingly inevitable unless through some knowledge or idea we gain control over it. The accumulation of empirical knowledge we entrust to scientists. The methods used to express ideas are cultivated by artists.

The two sides transgress their borders when scientists try to govern the soul or when artists try to depict the relationship between science and humankind. This sets into motion a dynamic flow from the world of the materialistic and practical to the world of the spiritual and expressive. When an author chooses to create a work of fiction in which science is a central theme, we the readers are often rewarded with the fruits of an artist who confronts the inevitable — that all life ends in death. For the author, the scientist is the surrogate who can explore the potential for control over the limits of mortality. The literature in which artists view the pursuit of science never provides only one answer but allows us to learn the myriad ways these issues might be confronted.

Mary Shelley’s Dr. Frankenstein claims his main purpose is to stop death from taking away people who are still loved and needed in the world: "I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might... renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (Shelley 53). But if we look carefully at his rhetoric we discover that his declarations are not one concrete idea or methodology but rather a combination of statements that sometimes even contradict each other:

"Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds which I should first break through."

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"I... set down natural history and all its progeny as a deformed and abortive creation, and entertained the greatest disdain for a would-be-science which could never even stop within the threshold of real knowledge... Destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter and terrible destruction."

(41)

It is significant that the whole narrative of creating his monster and the consequences of its creation is told to Walton, himself a frustrated scientist. Victor has the luxury of mixing introspection into the recollection of his thoughts and decisions in the past: "I also record those events which led by insensible steps, to my after tale of misery for when I would account to myself for the birth of that passion which afterwards ruled my destiny... became the torrent which, in its course, has swept away all my hopes and joys" (38).

Victor admits to Walton, who in turn tells the reader, that his work in trying to change the decrees of Nature is a failure and he has not been able to unveil the secrets of her immortality. We are unsure if Victor intends to breach the sealed borders of immortality by the actual defiance of death or by the creation of a race to whom he will serve as something of a mythical parent-god. But we do know that Victor (and therefore Shelley) understands that passing his story on to another person ensures its longevity. The essence of a text as definite carrier of a message into the future is also emphasized in the recognition Frankenstein gives to that tradition when he refuses to let Walton gain any information on the technique of creating the monster:

... but on this point he was impenetrable.

"Are you mad? ... Would you also create for yourself and the world a demoniacal enemy? Peace, peace! Learn my miseries and do not seek to increase your own."

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On the other hand, when Victor knows that Walton is keeping notes of the story of the monster he checks and augments them, especially regarding the "life and spirit to the conversations he held with his enemy." Frankenstein did not observe scientific protocol in creating the monster, but he still wants control of how others will perceive his actions:
“Since you have preserved my narration,” said he, “I would not that a mutilated one should go down to posterity.”

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Just as Frankenstein has to trust Walton to faithfully preserve the story, the reader must believe that Wal­ton is a credible witness. Walton’s testimony becomes the immortal tale of a good man tinkering with nature to produce horrid results. Shelley made a good choice in having Walton, of all possible men, to serve as con­tact to the scientist in the fictional world. Even though Walton is on a suicide mission for the supposed good of mankind and will be the only man to see the monster and live, we do not read him as an incredible weaver of fantastic lies. His apparently unimpeachable honesty regarding his situation, his attention to detail, and his desperation to find himself a “true friend” cause us to read his letters as an authentic representation of reality. In choosing the epistolary method to pass us her tale, Shelley displays a keen insight into the nature of her audience; we tend to believe written testimony. The ethical concepts Shelley stresses in the story depend on the credibility of her story-telling for their life to continue. She is not unlike Walton, since the fate of the relevant information depends on the reliability of its bearer. To become immortal, the creator depends on the creation and vice versa, just as Victor, pursuing the monster finds this hopeful, taunting note:

My reign is not yet over … you live, and my power is complete. Follow me … Come on my enemy; we have yet to wrestle for our lives …

(195)

Thanks to Mary Shelley, the monster and Dr. Franken­stein did indeed enter immortality. The ideas Shelley wanted us to learn still haunt us: where life is created without love and responsibility, a monster will result. The suggestive power of the novel remains with us. The struggle to manipulate or control nature will result in destruction and death for the creator and the creation alike.

In R. U. R. there is no mention of immortality because the subject of death has been sublimated. We understand that the robots and their manufacturers depend on each other for survival, but it seems that no character in the play realizes this until it is too late. The final act, with its optimistic look into the future, comes as a surprise not only to those on stage, but to the audience as well. It is not clear what vision the engineers of R. U. R. had of the future of mankind other than on the most practical terms. They imagined an endless manufacturing process of robots which would free mankind from all the negative aspects of modern life. By mechanizing their view of humans they lessened their humanity and ignored the effect of idleness on the human spirit. Domain describes the future that he perceives:

Everyone will take as much as he wants … The robots will clothe and feed us … everybody will be free from worry, and liberated from the degradation of labor. Everybody will live only to perfect himself.

(Capek 25)

The scientists and engineers of R. U. R. have been solely occupied with materialistic concerns and have failed completely to anticipate the spiritual and emotional crises that their work would lead to among humans and among robots as well. In their insistence to make the mass production of their product a force that is eternal, they ignore the shelf life of the individual product, as well as their own mortality.

The physical manifestations of the resulting disaster are very clear. Human beings have stopped having babies, and the robots have learned how to kill people in their regular, efficient manner. But since they have not experienced having to plan the future and are not aware of death, the robots do not realize how this may lead to their annihilation. Radius, the leader of the robot revolution, declares to Alquist, the last man: “Mankind is no more, Mankind gave us too little life. We wanted more life” (90).

Capek wrote R. U. R. in 1920, evincing a strong interest in humanity’s fate and in the triumph of nature through the emergence of love and new life. Early in his career he belonged to the Czech school called Vitalism, strongly influenced by the Bergson philosophy of élan vital and celebrating human existence, nature, and sexual love. The outbreak of World War I erased this optimism, replacing it with a tragic view of the future of humanity. When he wrote R. U. R. he was once again prepared to allow an optimistic ending, but had to point out how shortsighted and greedy mankind is. In representing the engineers as unable to show any thought or concern for the spirits of the robots they create, Capek expresses his distrust of materialistic technology.

By allowing the whimsy of one woman to be the catal­yst of disaster, Capek also shows how one person can unwittingly doom an entire race. Like Helen of Troy, she is always there to disrupt the procession of time and alter the future. Domain describes the future that he perceives:

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By allowing the whimsy of one woman to be the catal­yst of disaster, Capek also shows how one person can unwittingly doom an entire race. Like Helen of Troy, she is always there to disrupt the procession of time and alter the future. One may well ask not only if the humans of R. U. R. were blind to their responsibilities, but if they had some kind of death wish. For who keeps only one copy of a document that their whole existence depends on? Tragically, parts of Capek’s own legacy were destroyed in such a way. He died shortly before the German entry into Prague and his widow, fearing the safety of his correspondents, hastily burned all his letters.

Capek had an important idea to communicate to the world in the drama R. U. R. He wanted humanity to release itself from its “isms.” He explained the importance of pluralistic opinions in an interview published
in the Saturday Review after the play began to gain popularity:

"Finally, the Robots themselves revolt against all these idealists, and, as it appears, they are right too. We need not look for actual names for these various and controverted idealisms. Be these people either ... or ... the most important thing is ... that all of them are right in the plain and moral sense of the world. Each ... according to his lights seeks the greatest happiness for the greatest possible number of his fellow-man."}

Just as the humans in the factory could not change the results of their mistakes by any one of the theories each of them suggested, Capek wants us to know that the future of this world depends not on a single totalizing ideology but rather on people willing to learn from the past and with that multifaceted knowledge, to plan for the future. The importance of one person is not in the individual's immortal legacy but in the force of their wisdom and values remaining in the universe after them.

Capek's lesson is definitely not being taught to the citizens of Brave New World. Knowing what existed before them is forbidden to the citizens of World State. Since "History is Bunk," planning for the future is un-thinkable to the majority and a rarity among the few members of the leadership strata. Everyone else lives in the present, and even that they escape frequently, into a drug induced place that is timeless. The attitude towards time and eternity can be observed in the explanation given to John the Savage:

\[... \text{John raised objections.} \]

"But aren't you shortening her life by giving her so much?"

"In one sense, yes," Dr. Shaw admitted. "But in another we're actually lengthening it." The young man stared, uncomprehending. "Soma may make you lose a few years in time," the doctor went on. "But think of the enormous, immeasurable durations it can give you out of time. Every soma-holiday is a bit of what our ancestors used to call eternity."

(Huxley 156)

Aging does not exist in the World State, neither do families, and so the sense of time past and future that one obtains from the consideration of generations preceding and succeeding one’s own is not available. Death, on the other hand, is not hidden or ignored at all; as a matter of fact, it is part of the conditioning of children in society. When John is taken on a tour to a school, this side comment is offered:

\[\text{Five bus-loads of boys and girls, singing or in a silent embracement, rolled past them over the vitrified highway. "Just returned }\]

\[\text{... from the Slough Crematorium. Death conditioning begins at eighteen months. Every tot spends two mornings a week in the Hospital for the Dying. All the best toys are kept there, and they get chocolate cream on death days. They learn to take dying as a matter of course."} \]

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Death (and disappearance from history) rather than being seen as individual loss, have been transformed into another mandatory, dehumanizing ritual contribution to all society. The chapter dealing with the death of Linda, which devastates her son John, to the surprise of all around him, teaches us as much about the society as did the opening chapters about the hatchery. Again emphasizing the avoidance of history, all time is measured from the era of Ford and the Long War, while no other important events in the succeeding six hundred years are marked by this society.

In the World State the only individual to achieve immortality is Ford. Since Ford occupies a god-like position, we can appreciate the satire of using his immortalized name alongside the most casual expressions: "Oh Ford! ... His Fordship." Another satirical element is the use of names of persons, immortalized in our history, as first and last names of the book’s characters, who have no apparent knowledge of the allusion. This effect anchors Huxley’s book at a very specific point in history, confirming that it is a futuristic fantasy whose purpose is unabashedly didactic.

Both Huxley and Capek have managed to show the mortality of man by changing human-like creatures into parts of a machine. Capek’s mass-produced robots end up in the recycling bin when they start to fall apart. Huxley lets his conveyer-belt lab-produced people live in a timeless stream of altered states of consciousness until at last they end up as ashes. The creatures in neither group have been given "souls" by their creators, more criticism of Science’s sole interest in the material world and potential for harm to humanity.

Mary Shelley let the importance of emotion and human contact gain the upper hand over Dr. Frankenstein’s amazing physical accomplishment. We never know exactly how Victor sent the “life force” through the patched up monster but we do know what it is that the monster cries out for in his lonely agony. Capek, in R. U. R., represents the scientists as emotional imbeciles and even pragmatic fools, but their mistakes allow the mechanical creations to create a new race. Influenced by Helen’s sentimentality, the scientists gave the robots enhanced nervous sensibilities which make them care for one another. The end of the play tells us that nature has asserted her power in spite of humankind’s attempt to duplicate her, not because of

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scientific ingenuity. Huxley goes beyond the assumptive phase; his *Brave New World* takes several scenarios in science and technology for granted and we as readers see that the results are frighteningly similar to modern totalitarian states. Once we hear that inquiring about how epsilons are made inferior is answered with “Ass!” (13), we will hardly question the ethics of the caste system; it becomes a given. The reader can then focus on the author's cautionary tale, rather than struggling to accept the likelihood that such technology exists. This quality is one of the reasons science fiction is such a powerful tool in enabling us to imagine humanity's elusive future.

By refusing to create definitive answers and employing ambiguity, the authors of the three works we have reviewed continually challenge science. By eschewing definitive solutions in favor of offering open-ended possibilities, they criticize scientists' hubris and reduction of complex problems to mechanistic solutions. Even while the artist is fascinated by the scientist's ability to harness the power of accumulated knowledge and proven methodology, these three authors do not allow science the upper hand. We, the readers, are left with an image of scientists as deranged, morally repugnant people, who act without responsibility or thought. Writers, on the other hand, use art, imagination, and care. They recognize the fact that humans are more than just a mechanical assembly of certain chemicals which react with one another. Artists may imitate God but they do not try to perfect or rival divine creation.

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