

Cathy Caruth

Foreword

As the title of this book suggests, *Barbara Johnson: A Life with Mary Shelley* offers, in a single collection, Barbara Johnson's influential and path-breaking essays on the Romantic writer Mary Shelley written over the course of Johnson's lifetime. These essays provide essential insights into the work, and the life, of Mary Shelley, and more specifically, into the entanglement of Mary Shelley's life and writing. The original and daring works collected in this volume also sketch out a trajectory from the beginning to the end of Barbara Johnson's own brilliant career, and offer a glimpse of the inextricability of this career—of its far-reaching literary critical, theoretical, and feminist innovations—from the writing, and (theorized) life, of Mary Shelley.

Prefaced by a lucid description of Johnson's critical and theoretical development written by Mary Wilson Carpenter, a scholar of nineteenth-century British women's writing, the book consists of two parts, each involving essays by Barbara Johnson about Mary Shelley as well as critical interpretations of Barbara Johnson's writing by a major philosophical or literary theorist. In Part One, Johnson's early essays on Mary Shelley (or inspired by the image of Mary Shelley's monster) are followed by a critical commentary offered by the leading feminist philosopher Judith Butler. In Part Two, Johnson's last book, *Mary Shelley and Her Circle*—written during her final illness and finished just weeks before she died—is followed by a critical commentary written by the eminent literary critic and theorist Shoshana Felman. We thus come to understand Johnson's vision of the intricate relation between Mary Shelley's life and writing by discovering the ways in which Johnson's work is, in its turn, bound up with her

reading of—her life “with”—Mary Shelley. And we likewise discover the profound significance of these interwoven lives and works by recognizing the way in which Johnson’s conceptual and existential imperatives are commented on—and continue to resonate in—the inspiring essays of the women-critics who contribute to this volume, and who live, write, and think *with* Barbara Johnson.

In thus providing an inventive critical overlay of the work of Mary Shelley and of Barbara Johnson, this book affords new genealogical perspectives on late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century critical thought. In her innovative readings of Mary Shelley’s work, and in particular of her most famous novel, *Frankenstein*, Johnson began to shift the definition of Romanticism from its focus on great male poets to its interplay of these famous writers with the novelistic writing of Mary Shelley, who, always on the margin, implicitly (as Johnson suggested) narrated the complexity of the woman writer’s position in her own literary texts. During a period when the literary theoretical scene was drawing its own lines back to its Romantic forebears—particularly in the cutting-edge deconstructive writing of the 1980s—Barbara Johnson thus opened up a new line between contemporary thought and a different romanticism, one which gave birth to a genre of literary, theoretical, and (indirectly) autobiographical writing exemplified, in stunning originality, by Johnson’s own work. At the same time, by drawing together Johnson’s work on Mary Shelley with the work of influential feminist critics and theorists, *Barbara Johnson: A Life with Mary Shelley* allows us to recognize another alternative genealogy, one that binds the feminist critical writing of the 1980’s—whose legacy is practiced also by the feminist commentators in this book—to the newly thought Romanticism that Johnson had herself reconfigured. Proceeding from Barbara Johnson’s own interest, beginning with her work on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, in the origination of new kinds of lineages—in previously unrecognized ways in which literature, and criticism, are engendered and reproduced—this volume thus provides fresh genealogical narratives of Barbara Johnson’s original vision and of an era of contemporary theory that profoundly altered our relation to our texts and to our lives.

This collection thus proceeds by “circling back”—in the evocative phrase of Shoshana Felman from her “Afterword”—to the beginning of Johnson’s work on Mary Shelley and to the manner in which that work moves forward through the entirety of Johnson’s career and through her enduring

influence on the world of criticism and theory. In so doing, these essays, as a collection, do for Barbara Johnson what Felman says Johnson does for Mary Shelley: they write “her impossible autobiography,” and thus provide a narrative group and a “circle of listening”¹ that, like the listening of Mary Shelley near the fire on that rainy night of the famous ghost story contest—the writing competition that would lead to the creation of *Frankenstein*—becomes a generative moment and perpetuates the origination of a new genre of critical writing in which autobiography, theory, and literature are closely intertwined. The circle of women readers and writers in this book does not exactly reproduce or mimic that original circle at the fire (which, after reading Johnson’s *Mary Shelley and her Circle*, we cannot understand anymore as a single circle), nor do the women commentators in this book simply circle around Barbara Johnson, since in the process of reading her work they have been, unwittingly, pulled into a circle around Mary Shelley. Barbara Johnson, Mary Wilson Carpenter, Judith Butler, and Shoshana Felman indeed form, together, part of a circle of women listeners and writers that did not quite yet exist for Mary Shelley and even now may be less a completed circle than a call for others to join a future narrative and critical group.

Johnson herself, with her satirical wit and—even in the face of her own imminent death—her refusal of excessive pathos, would perhaps characterize this collection in a less tendentious manner. In “Gender Theory and the Yale School”—included in this volume and discussed here by both Carpenter and Felman—Johnson draws attention to the male-centeredness of the early volume *Deconstruction and Criticism*, which consisted of five male critics of the so-called “Yale School.” Johnson relates how, “at the time of the publication of . . . *Deconstruction and Criticism*, several of us—Shoshana Felman, Gayatri Spivak, Margaret Ferguson, and I—discussed the possibility of writing a companion volume inscribing female deconstructive protest and affirmation centering not on Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ‘The Triumph of Life’ (as the existing volume was originally slated to do) but on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.”² That female counter-manifesto, Johnson says, “might truly have illustrated the Girardian progression ‘from mimetic desire to the monstrous double.’ Unfortunately, this *Bride of Deconstruction and Criticism* never quite got off the ground.”³ Inspired here by the spark of Johnson’s still recent life, the women who write in this volume may finally have animated that long-forgotten monstrous Bride⁴—a vision of the book that, I am sure,

they would consider a compliment and that, as Johnson reminded us in her discussion of Dr. Frankenstein's creation, also calls upon us to recognize its own inherent beauty.

In reading this book we must, then, attend to the different interwoven strands of life, of death, of autobiography, of criticism, and of theory that make up the complex relationship between Barbara Johnson and Mary Shelley, and that constitute the subtle resonances between the insights of Johnson's readers and her own foundational work. These writers, in a posthumous conversation with Barbara Johnson, also dramatize for us the emergence and evolution of a mode—or modes—of reading and thinking that have, collectively, produced a lasting impact on contemporary critical thought.

Mary Shelley, as Barbara Johnson tells us in her last work—published here for the first time—tended first to the living Percy Bysshe Shelley and later to the dead one, a task that was truly, for her, a matter of the heart. The three women in this volume, who write so beautifully of Barbara Johnson's life and work, also tended to Barbara Johnson in her life: both as interlocutors while she lived, and as friends and supporters at the end of her life. They now form a posthumous circle that precisely crosses between death and life—the lives and deaths of Mary Shelley and of Barbara Johnson—in order to transmit the revitalizing force of Barbara Johnson's creativity, and singular originality, which cannot be exhausted by any genealogy, and cannot be reduced to any school or lineage.

Barbara Johnson tells us that the ghost stories that had inspired the writing contest behind *Frankenstein* had to do with “the uncanniness of death,” but Mary Shelley's novel was concerned with “what gave life.” This volume, too, occasioned by Johnson's early death, is also, ultimately, about *what gives life*: in the work, and in the lives (and deaths), of the great women writers who are at its center. They are all, indeed, as Felman writes of Johnson, “theorists who became storytellers,” women who both write and narrate—who narrate a life as they write their critical and theoretical appraisals of another woman's work—in order to pass on to us the spark of life communicated, across time and writing, from one woman in the circle to the next.

May 2013