

Mary Shelley's
Frankenstein,
1818-2018

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Edited by

Maria Parrino, Alessandro Scarsella
and Michela Vanon Alliata

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-4889-9

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4889-3

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FOREWORD

In February 2018 the editors of the present volume organised a two-day international conference in Venice to celebrate the bicentenary of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, one of the most successful and haunting stories of all time. This publication grew out of that event, which was attended by panellists from Europe, the United States, Canada and Asia, and for which we would like to thank Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and in particular the Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati and its director Maria Del Valle Ojeda Calvo, for providing institutional and financial support.

The nineteen essays collected in this volume, which were originally presented at the Venice conference, have all been extensively revised, expanded, and updated. The book is divided into three parts and preceded by the editors' introduction. While the first part turns primarily to the text itself, analysing its fictional techniques, the second and the third are concerned with placing the novel in a wider cultural context, exploring the numerous afterlives of the novel, its reception, and adaptations in different media, such as drama, cinema, graphic novels, television series, and computer games.

In their various critical approaches, these essays aim to pay tribute to, and account for, the persistent hold that Mary Shelley's masterpiece continues to exert on the imagination of readers, writers and artists in all fields of human creativity.

PART ONE

READING FRANKENSTEIN

INTRODUCTION

MARIA PARRINO

In her *Journal* entry for 12 August 1816, Mary Shelley recorded: “Write my story and translate. Shelley goes to the town, and afterwards goes out in the boat with Lord B. – after dinner I go out a little in the boat, and then Shelley goes up to Diodati. – I translate in the evening and read *Le Vieux de la Montagne*” (Shelley 1987, 124). On Wednesday, 31 December 1817 (the day before its publication) Shelley wrote: “Read Tacitus – Walk – S[helley] reads Gibbon – Fran[kens]stein comes.” Between the two entries, Mary Shelley often mentioned working on the “story” – *Frankenstein* – which was thus accompanied by translation and reading in a foreign language, activities Shelley carried out simultaneously as part of her daily routine. This is not surprising for one whose stepmother was a professional translator and father a political thinker and a committed student of foreign languages. Nor is it surprising for a writer who was a determined and assiduous reader of (and listener to) books covering a diversity of genres. Such a multi-cultural and multilingual background marked her personal and professional life, both characterized by a systematic intersection of languages, motifs and themes.

If reading, writing and translation are crucial features of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, it is from an analysis of her knowledge of European literature and her personal “rambles” in European countries that there emerges a relationship between the author’s multi-language experiences and her writing of *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley’s multicultural reading influenced her writing, leading her to engage with issues of authenticity, narrative structure and translation. Crossing geographical and language borders was a feature of her writing, as is evident in the fact that she made the most famous Gothic monster a multilingual traveler. The Creature speaks French and English, and meets polyglot characters: Victor is French and speaks German and English; Elizabeth speaks Italian and French; Safie speaks Turkish and learns French; he is a migrant into foreign countries and languages.

Reading *Frankenstein* means more than simply reading Mary Shelley's novel, for the considerable number of texts mentioned lead towards an intertextuality that shows strong commitment, and is of unquestionable interest. The numerous references include Plutarch's *Lives*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, Volney's *The Ruins*, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner," Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Ovid's "Prometheus," and Godwin's *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*. Similarly expansive is the formative influence of philosophical, political and scientific writings by John Locke, Mary Wollstonecraft, Erasmus Darwin, Luigi Galvani, Humphrey Davy and de Buffon, sources which Mary Shelley used for her novel whilst taking a scholarly and critical approach through which at times she shaped these multifarious works to her needs.

All the chapters in this section reveal a concern with the origins of *Frankenstein*. Although in her "Introduction" to the 1831 edition Mary Shelley articulated a version of the origins of her invention ("not out of void, but out of chaos"), critics nevertheless feel the need to further investigate the author's imaginative powers and trace the nature and the structure of her literary creation. Lia Guerra analyses the issue of origins and creation both in Genesis and in the mythological tradition, and speculates on the foundation myth and the creation of the first humans. She underlines the impressive extent of Mary Shelley's reading before writing *Frankenstein*, which shows an encyclopedic knowledge characteristic of her family and her community. Antonella Braida discusses the origin of Mary Shelley's interest in justice and law. The young author's awareness of contemporary legal and political reforms emerges in the way the novel deals with the trial of Justine and discusses the issue of human rights. The juridical language used proves not only the influence of political thinkers (Godwin and Montagu), but shows both Mary Shelley's "critique of the law by subverting its major tenets" and her desire to deviate from common practice and provoke debate. If the trial highlights the arguments directed against the death penalty, the Creature's final admission of his guilt shows he has learnt the "sanguinary laws of man."

Victor Sage poses the question of how we contextualise the ambiguous nature of the Sublime in *Frankenstein*, analysing the emotional impact of awe in the characters' description of the landscape. Intertwining biographical and textual references, Sage revisits the argument between H.-B. de Saussure and de Buffon, and its connection with the ascent on foot of the Mer de Glace in the valley of Chamonix by Mary Shelley and her husband Percy. A similar double-featured analysis emerges in Michael

Hollington's chapter on "ruinism" which widens our perspective upon the theme of ruins, challenging the exclusive reference to Volney in the novel. Hollington indicates the different images of nature in *Frankenstein* and underlines the paradoxical connection between constructive and destructive creation, the Creature and creator locked in a *doppelgänger* relationship.

Alessandro Scarsella focuses on Mary Shelley's approach to the epistolary form of the novel, analyses the timeline of the letters and the changes in format from Walton's first letter addressed to his sister to the last one – marked simply as "in continuation" – thereby making the move from the epistolary to the modern novel. Maria Parrino's chapter shifts the perspective from Walton's word-for-word transcription of Frankenstein's oral report to the auditory images of his framed writing. By focusing on the prosodic elements which are frequently mentioned in the novel, this chapter invites the reader to deal with "aural literacy," the ability to acquire knowledge by listening and engaging with the acoustic world.

The variety of topics which emerge from any study of *Frankenstein* is so great that no single publication can encompass them. Luckily, we are not the only ones publishing on *Frankenstein*, but proud members of a wider community of writers and scholars who feel the pressure to celebrate such a meaningful text, and experience the pleasure in doing so. We join the number of those who continue to have something to say about this text, those who despite (and because of) their reading and re-reading of the novel continue to find something new and intriguing in the 75,000 words which a 21-year-old author assembled and bid "go forth and prosper." In the final chapter of his book on *Frankenstein*, genetics, and popular culture, science writer Jon Turney warns (and reassures) us thus: "We are never going to be rid of *Frankenstein*, even if we want to be" (Turney 1998, 220). We surely do not want to be.

Works Cited

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CHAPTER ONE

“IN THE BEGINNING...” THE BIBLE AND MYTHOLOGY IN MARY SHELLEY’S EARLY PRODUCTION

LIA GUERRA

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth and the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

This is of course Genesis 1-5, where the first occurrence of the phrase “in the beginning” appears in the text of King James Bible. Another occurrence is in the Gospel of John I:1 and I:2: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.” Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews 1:10 resumes the image: “And Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth: and the heavens are the works of thine hands.”

The reasons for my making such a solemn opening lie in the peculiar quality of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* of 1818, a text – to start with – deeply concerned with origin and creation, enrolling as it does among its characters a life-giver and a new-born man. Secondly, it is a text encapsulating in its subtitle a myth – in fact a foundation myth: this is testified in the tragic tradition attached to Prometheus, starting from the drama attributed to Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* (5th century BC), where the Titan is depicted as chained by Zeus to a mountainside in the Caucasus in punishment for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humanity – fire standing for the foundation of human technology. Prometheus is a foundation myth also because it resembles the creator-God of the Old

Testament, as the Greek legend describes him creating the first humans from clay or earth. Thirdly, the novel attaches an unusual relevance to the power of the Word, as does the Biblical text: in the narrative the Creature refers to language as “a God-like science” (Shelley 1994, 88). The interconnection of these three items will hopefully clarify the link between mythology and Christianity in the Shelleys’ circle. Biographical research around the Shelleys has long agreed that religion and heathen mythology were present in the early debates going on within the radical group they were part of, influenced by an earlier generation of Jacobin writers (initially Godwin and Wollstonecraft), and by Locke’s philosophical thought.

I will start from two basic statements: a) *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, first published anonymously in 1818, shares the parentless condition of all myths (Lévi-Strauss, 1969) and also marks the presence of myth in its subtitle; b) the 1818 text itself soon acquired an independent life, transforming itself into something different from the original text, in fact metamorphosing into a myth of its own.

I intend to address the topic of the use of myth in the Shelley circle from a wider perspective, viewing the origin of myth in a collective psychic reality meant to generate doubt and questions rather than offering answers, as ancient mythology was supposed to do. As the expression of pre-logical societies, and as a nonverbal way of knowing, myth enables the cultural man to designate pre-verbal knowledge. As such, it is contrasted with *logos*, the word whose validity or truth can be argued and demonstrated. The Shelleys’ interest in classical authors was supported by the work of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century mythographers, who contributed to general knowledge a careful and considered assessment of the mythology of the ancients, and a possibility of harmonizing it with the philosophical tradition of scepticism. As Gary Kelly has aptly clarified,

[T]he Romantic period saw extensive use of myth and history in literature. Since classical antiquity, myth and history had been used in literature for several purposes: to validate new works by reference to established and prestigious knowledges, to assimilate new subjects to the supposedly common knowledge of an educated and elite readership, to critique contemporary issues indirectly, and to suggest analogies between contemporary issues and supposedly universal, transcendent, or actual historical examples. In the Romantic period, myth and history continued to be used in literature for these ends, but they were also used in various new ways to reconstruct literature in the image and interests of those who wrote and read it, as a brief and partial taxonomy can suggest [...]. History and

historiography were similarly rewritten, imitated, faked, forged, and fictionalized, but especially appropriated for fictional representation of what the historical record did not or could not represent – the subjective and private lives of historic individuals or of fictitious common individuals placed in significant historical events or eras. (Kelly 1998, 70)

Apart from numerous primary sources, the Shelleys could rely for back-up on reference-books that all Romantic poets were familiar with, starting from Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* (1788), the first example of an encyclopaedic method applied to classical lore, soon to be followed by Bell's *New Pantheon* in 1790. In both, mythological topics are treated as "facts," and not interpreted, and are drawn up alongside historical characters and real places. In addition, pagan idols and their deeds are not compared to Christian revelation in order to emphasize the latter's superiority, but rather dealt with on their own. In 1806 Edward Baldwin's *Pantheon* was published: far from being encyclopaedic, this text revitalized the eighteenth-century allegorical interpretation of mythology and re-established the misused *topos* of ancient Greece vs Christianity. The opening reads: "[Christianity] fears no comparison with the mythology of ancient Greece" (Baldwin 1814, vi). However, the conclusion is not that the Greek religion is so inferior to Christianity that the comparison should not even be made, but rather that there are basic similarities between the two, that the Greek mind is deeply and genuinely religious and that Greek myth *is* religion. Far from being atheists, the Greeks "had the happiness to regard all nature, even the most solitary scenes, as animated and alive, to see everywhere around them a kind and benevolent agency, and to find on every side motive for contentment, reliance and gratitude" (Baldwin 1814, 82). This quotation is interesting for at least two reasons: one is that "Edward Baldwin" is the pseudonym for William Godwin, whose influence on both Percy and Mary was pervasive – even shaping a certain reading of paganism, as Percy clearly showed with his highly emotional reactions and the fascination with pagan features he showed when visiting Pompei in December 1818 (Shelley 1964, 74-75).¹ The second reason is

¹ See letter to Peacock of January 1819 (Shelley 1964, II: 74-75). Surprisingly, the otherwise laconic *Journals* record the impact of the visit to Pompeii on both Mary and Percy: "Tuesday 22 [December] [1818] Go to Pompeii – we are delighted with this ancient city – read Montaigne – S. reads Livy" (Shelley 1987, I: 245). This visit was soon to be followed by a ride to Paestum, enthusiastically discussed in a letter by Percy Shelley to Peacock on February 25, 1819 (Shelley 1964, II: 78-80). No emotional reaction is recorded in the *Journals*, where the facts are simply stated. (Shelley 1987, I: 249). Between the end of 1819 and 1820 Percy Shelley

that Mary Shelley is credited with co-authoring (with Percy Bysshe Shelley) the draft of an essay mentioned by André Koszul as early as 1922 in the “Introduction” to his edition of Mary Shelley’s *Proserpine and Midas* (Koszul, 1922, 26).² Emily Sunstein in 1981 implicitly supported Mary’s authorship for the essay, referred to as “The necessity of a belief in the heathen mythology to a Christian” and tagged it as Mary’s answer to Charles Leslie’s challenging *Short and Easy Method with the Deists of 1697* (Leslie 1733 and Sunstein 1981, 49-54). In 1993 Jane Blumberg contributed to contextualizing the fragment, mentioning another draft of an incomplete *History of the Jews* to be attributed to Mary Shelley – a text that provided a radical reading of Genesis and Exodus and questioned the divine nature of Revelation (Blumberg 1993). The Shelleys’ interest in religious topics and in the religion of the pagans was never superficial or fashionable, and it took different shapes, from the acknowledgment of the archetypal nature of classic mythology to an overall fascination for the life-style of ancient Greece or imperial Rome (Seymour 2000 and Richardson 1993).

As the list of books read by Mary and Percy testifies, from the moment they started to record their common experiences in 1814, Mary’s choice fell on both historical and fictional texts, thus setting a pattern for her subsequent activity as a creative writer who frequently based her fiction on historical settings or on historically researched evidence. Such a double direction involved her “classic library” as well, where translating from Latin and Greek in order to learn these languages turned out to be more than just a scholarly exercise. Mary’s contact with classical authors started in 1814 with Latin and Greek writers (Diogenes Laertius, Cicero, Petronius, Suetonius), followed in 1815 by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Virgil, Southey’s *Indian Mythology*, the Bible explained by Voltaire, the New Testament, Sallust, and Plutarch.³ 1816 saw Mary reading Quintus Curtius (*Vita Alexandri*, as she names it), some of Horace’s *Odes*, and Cicero’s *De Senectute*, while Theocritus, Aeschylus (*Prometheus*), Lucian, Lucretius, Pliny, Plutarch and Tacitus were readings she shared with Percy. In 1817

also wrote “On the Devil, and Devils” where he discussed the attempt on the part of monotheistic religions to explain evil.

² This was the first time the two dramas appeared in print together. I have treated them in detail in Lia Guerra, *Il mito nell’opera di Mary Shelley* (Pavia: CLU, 1995), 21-43.

³ In the meantime, Percy went through Livy, Seneca, Plutarch, Euripides, Hesiod, Theocritus, Herodotus, Thucydides and Homer. The list of books read by either or both Mary and Percy between 1818 and 1819 is astonishing (Shelley 1987, I).

Mary added Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, Pliny the Younger's *Epistulae*, *The Story of Psyche* in Apuleius, *Caesar's Life* in Suetonius and Tacitus' *Annales*.⁴ 1818 saw Mary busy with the *Aeneid*, Terence, Horace's *Odes* and a French translation of Lucian. The *Journals* record Mary continuing her reading of Lucian and Pope's *Homer* for the next two years, together with a serious engagement with Italian authors (Ariosto, Tasso, Monti, Alfieri, Dante) and exercises in translation from the Latin (the *Aeneid* and the *Georgics*), Terence's comedies, Horace, and Livy's 45 books of *Histories* (covered between June 1818 and July 1820), Homer's *Hymns*, Greek tragedians, Aristophanes, Plato, and Herodotus. While Percy returned to Euripides, Lucretius and Homer, in 1819 Mary was still busy with the *Georgics* and in 1820 she pursued a serious study of the Greek language with Prince Mavrocordato in Italy. The *Journals* record a steady involvement and the accompanying list of the books they read mentions, for Percy: Sophocles, Plato, Euripides, Apollonius Rhodius; and for both Percy and Mary: Livy, the Bible, the *Aeneid* and the *Georgics*, Lucretius, Cicero, Homer, and *Oedipus Tyrannus* (Shelley 1987).

In fact, far from remaining just a repository of images and a huge vocabulary she could fish from, classical culture became a basic structure for Mary's work, its backbone and possibly the backbone of her life as well. Classic mythology does in point of fact accompany not only her fictional corpus but also the way she looked at her own life. One example is provided by the *Fable of Cupid and Psyche* (Apuleius, *Metamorphosis* iv-vi), read by Mary on 20-21 May, 1817, soon after Percy had read it at Marlow. Even though she initially addressed it as an exercise in translation,⁵ still the fable continued to haunt both her life and her work as an obvious symbol for the brevity of happiness. It must certainly have been with her when she was writing *Mathilda* in Leghorn in August 1819, because images and stylistic features show correspondences between her novella and the Latin text (Guerra 1995, 31-35).⁶ In Apuleius the climax is

⁴ Percy worked instead on Greek drama: Plato, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Homer's *Iliad* and *Hymns*, Arrian's Indian history and also Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* (Shelley 1987, I).

⁵ She used the same exercise book, which included also a passage of translation from *Aeneid* I: 1-30, and Italian exercises in phraseology (de Palacio 1964, 564-71).

⁶ If the *incipit* of Apuleius is in the style of fairy tales ("Erant in quadam civitate rex et regina. Hi tres numero filias forma conspicuas habuere."). "Once upon a time there lived in a city a king and a queen, who had three daughters of great beauty" (Zimmerman 2012, IV, 28; my translation), *Mathilda* describes her family history by providing the most obvious tale of origins, the story of her mother, dressed in

marked by the strength of the Word – Apollo’s oracle – that turns into a powerful act. Psyche’s destiny is defined in Apuleius with the same illocutionary strength with which Mathilda’s father’s secret word defines her destiny, plunging her into a desert that is both physical and spiritual (Apuleius 1984, iv, xxxiii and xxxv).⁷ When Psyche speaks with her sisters about the secret she should keep, she is lost: the spoken word ruins the girl, forcing her existence into a new direction. Such a binary pattern, so typical of the structure of myth, is rooted in the contrast between pairs of mutually exclusive terms: a before and an after, a palace and the desert, happiness and despair, which together mirror a semantic opposition between richness/fertility and barrenness – one that defines the reversal in her own destiny.

A binary pattern structures much of Mary Shelley’s early writings: most clearly in *Frankenstein*, where the Creature, the child of the Enlightenment, who initially perceives language as a divine tool and believes it has power over the order of the imaginary, soon experiences it as useless; this will give a totally new turn to the story. Solidarity is not spurred by the Creature’s rhetorical skills, and no possibility of fusion with other humans emerges: the desert solitudes of the Alps and the icy Poles will contrast with any possibility of social happiness. In *Mathilda* it is the father’s confession (“the Word of the Father”) that overturns events, as mentioned above. But whereas both *Mathilda* and *Frankenstein* keep the dual vision unresolved, Mary’s further access to myth in her two dramas *Proserpine*

fairly-tale style (“There was a gentleman of small fortune who lived near his family mansion, who had three lovely daughters...”); the idealized heroine is in both texts stereotypically perfect (“praecipua, preclara pulchritude”: “the most beautiful... angelically gentle”), and the name of Mathilda’s mother, Diana, makes her the inhabitant of the world of the gods, just like Apuleius’ Psyche. But above all the ambiguous relationship Mary Shelley attributes to Diana with her future husband (and Mathilda’s father) (“she and my father had been playmates from infancy” – echoing Victor’s relationship with Elizabeth in *Frankenstein*) will be re-enacted or doubled in Mathilda’s life, where she becomes the object of the love of her own father. Mathilda mentions Apuleius’ fable explicitly only once (“Like Psyche I lived for awhile in an enchanted palace [...] when suddenly I was left on a barren rock; a wide ocean of despair rolled around me [...] universal death”) even though the echoes are constantly present (Shelley 1990, 190).

⁷ The Latin text describes a high rock where the girl is abandoned (“itur ad constitutum scopulum montis ardui, cuius in summo cacumine statutam puellam cuncti deserunt”: “they reached the destined rock on top of a high mountain and there left the girl on her own on the appointed spot”). *Mathilda* has a “dreary heath bestrewn with stones” that she picks as refuge in desperation.

and *Midas* – also based on a dichotomy of before and after – shows how she tried to discard the dualistic fissure in the name of inclusiveness.

A fissure is always the starting point in Mary's production – it is a moment that frames the texts in a strongly symbolic way and in a complex binary formal pattern, as is so starkly represented in Genesis I:1-5.⁸ *Frankenstein* is a myth of origins and therefore is a deeply feminine myth, bearing as it does on women's role as originators. It explodes the unnatural Creation myth and operates according to that same fissure: it is implicit in the subtitle, which points to the double nature of the myth of Prometheus (as generous giver of life and as rude trespasser upon human and divine laws), and it is present in the act of creation itself that generates a deep crack in Victor's private and social worlds alike. The choice of myth as the dominant isotopy of Mary Shelley's corpus has also to do with the holistic quality myth can offer, when compared to scientific thought. However fascinated she may have been by the discourses of science that entered her famous novel, if faith, magic, imagination and experience had to be included, it was only through myth that a unity could be achieved.

In the "Prefatory Note" to the 1922 edition of *Proserpine and Midas*, Koszul insisted on the fact that these dramas contributed to offer readers, in their "proper setting for some of the most beautiful lyrics of the poet [Percy Bysshe Shelley]," "an example of that classical renaissance which the romantic period fostered" (Koszul 1992, 2). The whole "Prefatory Note" is meant to downplay Mary Shelley's "effort" and to highlight Percy's role as inspirer. Jean de Palacio's reading of the texts, however, has contributed to highlight how Mary Shelley's revision of sources can offer better food for thought (de Palacio 1969). The most relevant aspect for the present discussion is the analysis of how Mary moved away from coeval treatments of both myths (as in comic operas, bucolic pastorals or fantastic renderings) and, particularly in the case of *Proserpine*, how she retold Ovid's tale by giving a new direction to the fable. This in fact turns out to be a fable speaking mainly to women and of women, and of the severing of love ties (mother/daughter, female friendship), but also a fable displaying a binary structure almost as strong as that structuring *Frankenstein*. The myth of the Great Mother takes an unexpected turn: insisting on the mother-daughter relationship rather than on the metaphor of the changing of the seasons, or on the topic of the rape (offstage), the

⁸ Genesis can be read as a myth explaining the world by means of binary categories: darkness vs light, heavens vs air, earth vs water, sea water vs rainwater and so forth.

drama highlights the double nature of the two goddesses, two shapes for the same Ceres (in Sicily the two goddesses Ceres and Proserpine were called Damatres, which means “the Mothers” and were portrayed in ways that made it difficult to distinguish one from the other). Therefore, the *mythos* of their forced separation will come to point to the deep division in the feminine world between the Parthenos and the *gyne*, the virgin and the woman, a division which appears also in Homer, where there is no connection between Demetra and Persephone. Shelley’s choice of myth goes back to the pre-Olympic figure of Demetra as the powerful goddess of the earth, and above all works on the cohesive function of the female relationship within the community of the goddesses, nymphs and naiads that make up the *dramatis personae* of the play. Despite being victims of patriarchal power, they are united against it in the name of feminine solidarity. And here the distance from Ovid is huge: virtually no male character appears, apart from “Shades from Hell” and Aesculapius, the plain villain of the situation in Ovid – and even he is portrayed more as a normative presence, careful to state that justice must be respected, rather than as simply spying on Proserpine’s eating of the pomegranate seeds. Women, on the other side, are pictured as a source of love and knowledge – and are part of the chain of transmission of knowledge through the telling of mythic tales – but also as capable of destruction when wounded in love. And here the connections with Frankenstein’s Creature appear very strong, witness the murderous sequence that characterizes his behaviour after perceiving the void of love in which he is condemned to live, as well as the binary structure brought about by the chasm between before and after. Something should also be said on the relevance of the topic of memory as an instrument of truthfulness: the six months of darkness Proserpine is supposed to spend in Hell will erase the damnation imposed by the Olympus powers, provided they are spent in the memory of the six months of light to be shared with the mother. Memory as a temple turns a time of unhappiness into the actuality of an interior religion, the religion of love.

Turning now to the second drama, devoted to the mythological figure of Midas, a glance at the *dramatis personae* shows a difference: the total absence of female characters. If Ceres embodied the mother-figure and Midas the father-figure, the latter’s lack of empathy and his avarice, closely following the original source, are easily readable as “political” issues, myth speaking quite clearly about the world we live in, just as *Frankenstein* had done. This was an obvious step for a woman who had received her education through classical authors and had always been invited by her father to delve into “male” topics (history, politics, and of

course the male topic *par excellence*, mythology). And the fact that the two dramas were presumably composed as educational tools for two young girls, points to the value of myth as a powerful instrument of communication.⁹ *Midas* opens an even larger gap from the traditional exploitation of myth, but does so in a parodic rather than a dramatic way, since Mary Shelley strives to recapture the ritualistic origins of Greek drama whose roots are in the cult of Dionysus and in the rites concerning the fertility of the earth. The mysteries are the early principles of the ancient religion that culture has contributed to taming. This trend in the reading of myth was probably influenced by the German authors who had uprooted the Dionysian aspect of Greek culture (from Wieland to Schiller to Schlegel) and by the less than orthodox positions of Richard Payne Knight in England.

On 3 May 1820, an entry in Mary Shelley's *Journals* states: "Write – finish Pxxxxxxx [Proserpine] – Read Livy and Robinson Crusoe – spend the evening at Casa Silva" (Shelley 1987, I: 316). This is the only trace left by the mythological drama in the *Journals* (where *Midas* is never mentioned). Something more can be gathered from Mary's correspondence, mainly with prospective publishers for *Proserpine*, in the years 1824, 1826 and 1827. *Proserpine* was finally published as pages 1-20 in *The Winter's Wreath* for 1832, as "by the author of *Frankenstein*" (Shelley 1987, 316). The time of composition must therefore be set after the death of little Clara in Venice, on 24 September, 1818 and of little William in Rome on 4 June 1819; a period of mourning which was, in spite of the devastating family atmosphere, very productive: the first edition of *Frankenstein* came out in 1818, *Mathilda* was written in 1819, and in 1820 Mary started a systematic study of the Greek language. Readers are certainly accustomed to the long silences of the *Journals*, which are nevertheless usually rather detailed on the working activities of the couple. The total exclusion of information on the composition process of the two mythological dramas which involved both Mary and Percy appears all the more surprising, unless we read the texts mainly from Mary's point of view, as the direct output of her deepest feelings with regard to broken family ties. In which case silence is the only feasible reaction.

⁹ The addressees were Lady Mount Cashell's daughters, children of a very special birth: their mother, Margaret King (1773–1835), also known as Lady Mountcashell and Mrs Mason, had been Mary Wollstonecraft's pupil in Ireland and became a constant support to Mary Shelley in Italy. She had adopted the name Mason in honor of Wollstonecraft's fictitious governess in *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788).

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CHAPTER TWO

THE DIALOGIC SUBLIME: THE MER DE GLACE, THE SPIRITS OF LIBERTY, AND *FRANKENSTEIN*

VICTOR SAGE

The Sublime is a type of discourse. More than that, it is a persuasive discourse, a rhetoric, and I shall treat it as such in this chapter, as I try to contextualise its specific function in *Frankenstein*. As a persuasive discourse, the Sublime has certain distinctive features, one of which is a tendency to the self-effacing: it effaces its rhetorical means. The label “sublime” always appears self-evident, so there is a question about whether it can be dialogic. However, Longinus’s 2nd century AD treatise “Peri Upsilon” among other things is a recipe book for how to produce the sublime as a grand style in public speaking (Peri Upsilon literally means “Concerning the High”) and he suggests that to produce a sublime effect in language you need to compose a striking image which acts like a lightning-bolt and takes hold of the hearer in a single flash (Dorsch 1965, 100).¹ It is a semantic label which deliberately loses its referent and surreptitiously retains its connotation of power. We recognise the sublime by its emotional impact of awe, its ability (a) firstly to invoke the phenomenon of relative scale and then (b) to remove scale in its reference to the awesomely large or the Infinite. The conventionally opposed term is

¹ “The extent to which we can be persuaded is usually under our own control, but these sublime passages exert an irresistible force and mastery, and get the upper-hand with every hearer. [...] [A] well-timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and in a flash reveals the full power of the speaker.” (Dorsch 1965, 100). There is an excellently detailed discussion in Isobel Armstrong’s *The Radical Aesthetic*, apropos the “steep and lofty cliffs” at the beginning of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” of how this process of the “effacement” of the referent in the language of the Burkean sublime works (Armstrong 2000, 98).

the Beautiful, which stays within a scale, is orderly and causes not awe but pleasure in the observer, and is associated connotatively with love, rather than fear. For the 18th century, mountains become the archetypal example of the nature of the Sublime. In this chapter, I want to examine some of the contingent discourses that go to make up the particular and highly active use of the Alpine setting in *Frankenstein* – other dialogic parts of the equation, besides the obvious one of “the beautiful” – and then to reach some conclusions about how the rhetoric of the Sublime works in the text.

According to M. H. Abrams in his classic study *Natural Supernaturalism*, the original mythology that attaches to the Sublime and the Beautiful in the landscape of the natural world is the Christian myth of the Paradise that is Lost. In the 17th century, Bishop Thomas Burnet’s *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681-9) is the prose equivalent of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. God created a beautiful world, without mountains and without a sea, but at the time of Noah, God opened the Abyss because of the degeneracy of man and, says Burnet, “the frame of the Earth broke and fell down into the great Abyss” (Abrams 1971, 100). “The world we now inhabit,” as M.H. Abrams puts it, “is only the wreck of Paradise, with some remains indeed of its original beauty, yet overall the Image or Picture of a great Ruin [...]” Thus the distinction is between the “beautiful” and the “great” aspects of nature: and this distinction reveals, as Abrams puts it in a fine phrase, “the theodicy of landscape.” The beautiful reveals “God’s loving benevolence, while the vast and disordered in nature express his infinity, power and wrath” and cause in us a paradoxical union of delight and terror (Abrams 1971, 101). The romantic poets from Wordsworth on, argues Abrams, set themselves to revealing, in a secularised fashion, all the aesthetic and moral implications of landscape’s “theodicy,” especially in representations of the Alps.

Abrams’s paraphrase, “the wreck of paradise” is indeed very close to Mary Shelley’s characters’ descriptions of the Alps in *Frankenstein*: the setting of this novel is a constant and, I shall argue, insistently ironic background to the dreams of its protagonists. In the vocabulary of the text, the mountains, indeed the whole landscape that surrounds the lake of Geneva – particularly Mont Blanc – are often rendered as the home of “spirits.” Just one random example at this stage will suffice. In Chapter XVIII of the 1831 text, Mary Shelley has the guilt-ridden Frankenstein recall a spontaneous outburst by his murdered friend, the innocent and good-hearted Henry Clerval, as they were journeying through the vineyard-clad, placid, willow-islanded section of the Rhine: “Oh, surely the spirit that inhabits and guards this place has a soul more in harmony with man, than

those who pile the glacier, or return to the inaccessible peaks of the mountains of our own country ” (Shelley 1994, 559). We see here the opposition between the Beautiful and the Sublime, tied as it is to its corresponding landscapes, and in the novel’s landscapes there are also, it seems, corresponding spirits or *genii loci* (including “those that pile the glacier”) which inhabit these opposed landscapes.

The mention of the glacier here is important, because, as is well known, the model for the landscape of the novel is specifically tied to the ascent on foot to Chamonix made by Mary and Percy Shelley and a pregnant Claire Clairmont, which begins on 22 July and climaxes on 25 July 1816, the high point (in all senses) of the Diodati summer. Eloquent journal entries in the hands of both Mary and Percy have survived for this trip to the sources of the rivers Arve and Arveyron and the glaciers beneath the dome of Mont Blanc, jottings which were copied up by Mary, edited by the two of them, and published anonymously in 1817 as *The History of A Six Weeks’ Tour*; and these observations in all their layered form reveal how impressed they are with the sheer desolation of the glaciers, these frozen cataracts of ice. And the notion of usurpation is on their minds: Mary makes a joke on the first day about God and mountains which “sometimes peeped out in to the blue sky higher than one would think the safety of God would permit since it is well-known that the tower of Babel did not nearly equal them in immensity” (Shelley 1987, 114). But as the trip goes on it is their personal encounter with the glaciers which provides up close the shock of the Sublime: Mary Shelley, whose entry for 24 July (“I read nouvelle nouvelles and write my story. Shelley writes part of letter”) indicates, according to her modern editors, that she is composing the first bits of a first draft of *Frankenstein*, sounds the keynote of all their descriptions: “we get to the top at twelve and behold le [sic] mer de Glace. This is the most desolate place in the world” (Shelley 1987, 118-9).

The first draft of Percy Shelley’s letter to his friend and fellow-poet Peacock is written in her journal also, and it gives us more of the context of their view of the glaciers – the notion of “desolation” comes from a difference of opinion between two scientists who belong to two different sides of the Enlightenment, Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, the Enlightenment Geneva geologist and only the third person in history to climb Mont Blanc (his characteristically pragmatic goal being to measure the air-pressure at the summit), and Comte de Buffon, the great French naturalist, author of

the *Histoire Naturelle* (1749-89) (Fischer 2014, 26).² The issue is whether or not these glaciers are steadily encroaching on the fertile valleys and advancing inexorably each year. Here is how Percy Shelley puts it in his letter to Peacock:

There is something inexpressibly dreadful in the aspect of the few branchless trunks, which, nearest to the ice rifts, still stand in the uprooted soil. The meadows perish, overwhelmed with sand and stones. Within the last year, these glaciers have advanced three hundred feet into the valley. Saussure, the naturalist says, that they have their periods of increase and decay: the people of the country hold an opinion entirely different; but as I judge, more probable [...]. (Shelley, 1817, 160)

Saussure in his classic life's work, *Voyages dans les Alpes* (1779-1796), carefully considers the issue and writes that on balance he thinks that he can admit the continual depredations which local people report as increasing each year in the Vale of Chamonix "sans que cela prouvât que la masse totale des glaciers s'augmente continuellement" ("Without that proving that the total mass of the glaciers is continually on the increase") (de Saussure 1779, 46), an argument directed explicitly at Buffon's "Theory of the Earth" section of his *Histoire Naturelle* published in 1643.³ Percy Shelley, on the other hand, writing to his friend, Thomas Love

² This beautifully illustrated and highly informative booklet is on sale at the Geneva Museum of Natural History, which is housed in the traditional lakeside seat of the de Saussure family. For an interesting and well-researched account of the personal relations between Byron, the Shelleys, and the scientific community around Lac Léman, especially in Coligny (Tennant 2016, 18-19). Apparently only the year before, 1815, Humphrey Davy was given to fishing out of the front window of the house on the waterfront, the "Maison Chapuis" at Coligny (now destroyed), which was rented by Percy and Mary Shelley for the Diodati summer. Mary knew Davy through her father, William Godwin. Also Byron introduced Polidori to de Saussure's son. For Polidori's relation to this network see Stott 2013.

³ Buffon insists on the necessity of the processes and forces of Nature: one of these is the "refroidissement de la Terre" ("the cooling of the earth") which he emphasizes as a principle throughout his discussion; for example, in the sixth of his seven epochs in the history of the earth, he draws together, by a typically elegant combination of deductive and inductive reasoning, the behaviour of the glaciers of the North and South poles in the light of what was currently known about these very glaciers of the Alps, "qui ne fondent jamais en entiere" ("which never melt in their entirety"). Shelley shows himself aware of this grand argument ("gloomy and sublime") which forms a motive for his wanting to make such a dangerous ascent in the first place. (de Buffon, 2007, 1321-1322; and note 26).

Peacock, is thinking mythically and it is Buffon's pessimism which provides him with the Sublime view of the glacier:

I will not pursue Buffon's sublime but gloomy theory – that this globe which we inhabit will at some future period be changed into a mass of frost by the encroachments of the polar ice, and of that produced on the most elevated points of the earth. Do you, who assert the supremacy of Ahriman, imagine him throned among these desolating snows, among these palaces of death and frost, so sculptured in their terrible magnificence by the adamant hand of necessity, and that he casts around him, as the first essays of his final usurpation, avalanches, torrents, rocks, and thunders, and above all these deadly glaciers, at once the proof and symbols of his reign [...]. (Shelley 1817, 102)

The “palaces of death and frost” sounds like a Gothic echo of Canto III of Byron's *Childe Harold's* “the palaces of nature” which Mary Shelley uses ironically to describe these mountains as they appear to Frankenstein's “fallen,” would-be naïve vision of his native Alpine surroundings, in chapter VII of her novel (Shelley 1994, 502).⁴ According to the editors of Mary's journals, Shelley had read Buffon in Edinburgh in 1812 and Mary went on to read him in June and July 1817 (Shelley 1987, 114 and 117 n. 2), which may have encouraged her to connect the landscape of the opening chapter of her novel in which Captain Walton, the idealist would-be polar explorer, sights the Monster on the ice and meets Frankenstein, and Chapter X, in which Frankenstein, in this very vale of Chamoni, encounters the creature he has abandoned, an incident which I will come back to in a moment. Percy Shelley here makes reference to “Ahriman” – the Persian Zoroastrian equivalent of Milton's Satan who usurps the seat of Ormuz, the equivalent of God. Peacock, who, like Percy Shelley, was deeply interested in comparative mythology, had written about half a canto of an epic in Spenserian stanzas on this subject, in which there was some potential for a political allegory for the times, and Shelley here is urging him to use the desolation of the glacier as a hallmark metaphor for the revolt of a Demon or a Devil. When Peacock subsequently abandoned this

⁴ The allusion is to Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, III (1816), lxii, 2: “Above me are the Alps,/The palaces of nature, whose vast walls/Have pinnacled in clouds their snowy scalps./And throned Eternity in icy halls/Of cold sublimity, where falls and forms/The avalanche – the thunderbolt of snow!/All which expands the spirit, yet appals,/Gather around these summits, as to show/How Earth may pierce to Heaven, yet leave vain man below.” (Byron 1980, II: 100).

project, he left the stanzas to Shelley, who used the stanza form to write “Laon and Cythna,” subsequently retitled “The Revolt of Islam.”⁵

At the same time in Shelley’s letter the sinister active movement of the glacier seems also to figure as the body of a God who could not be usurped because, paradoxically, he is the body of Nature: “One would think that Mont Blanc, like the god of the Stoics, was a vast animal, and that the frozen blood forever circulated through his stony veins” (Shelley 1987, 167). The apparent paradox of the “frozen blood” that circulates here is given a sensory form by the haunting flow of the mighty rivers of the Arve and the Arveyron far beneath the apparently stationary “Sea of Ice,” in reality itself inching down from the summits. We should also think at this point of the opening of “Prometheus Unbound” (1820) and the frozen world that has come to pass as a result of Prometheus’s curse of Jove, which keeps Jove in power, before the revolutionary action of the “spirits” of Earth in that lyrical drama begins the great thaw.

After the death of Justine, which he knows he has caused, Frankenstein finds himself in a self-made prison of “deep, dark death-like solitude” (Shelley 1994, 513). He decides in Chapter IX to take a trip back to his native mountains to find some consolation. Soon we find him retracing the path up to the source of the “impetuous Arve.” The cottages here and there along the river form a scene of beauty; but it is “augmented and rendered sublime by the mighty Alps, whose white and shining pyramids and domes towered above all, as belonging to another earth, the habitations of another race of beings” (Shelley 1994, 516). The irony of this description is produced by the knowledge the reader has of Frankenstein’s past and his attempt to become one of this other race of beings by making his own creature. For the reader, the sublimity of the landscape is haunted not by “another race of beings” but by Frankenstein’s own romantic, egotistical capacity to forget himself and the irrevocable nature of his past that ties him to earth: following Agrippa and Paracelsus, he has conjured an earth-spirit and stolen fire – i.e. the technology of new chemical and electrical experiments that enabled him to animate dead flesh by imitating the spark of life. But here he stares up at the mountains, at Mont Blanc and Le Buet, as he returns to the glacier that seizes the Arveyron in its grip, calling them

⁵ This paragraph is indebted to Marilyn Butler (1979, 66, and notes, 321, n.13). For the origins and mythic extent of the role of Ahriman in Shelley’s writings (Curran 1975, 33-152); and their extensive notes. Apropos of the Sublime, see also the passage which Curran, *op. cit.*, uses as an epigraph to his chapter 3, namely Mary Shelley’s version of Diotima’s speech in her novella, *The Fields of Fancy*, 119.

“this glorious presence-chamber of imperial Nature” (Shelley 1994, 517) – a dream of absolute power – a dream of entering the inner sanctum of “the palace of nature.” The phrase “presence-chamber” suggests that, in Frankenstein’s dream of sublimity, nature is an imperial monarchy, not a republic.

Mary Shelley’s writing brings him up to this emotional climax and lets him down again the next morning with a capricious rainstorm like the one that beset herself, Percy and Claire in their final ascent to la Mer de Glace. She remembers in her description of Frankenstein’s ascent the climber’s illusion in the apparent motion of the mountain itself:

From the side where I now stood Montanvert was exactly opposite, at the distance of a league; and above it rose Mont Blanc, in awful majesty. I remained in a recess of the rock, gazing on this wonderful and stupendous scene. The sea, or rather the vast river of ice, wound among its dependent mountains, whose aerial summits hung over its recesses [...]. My heart, which was before sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy. I exclaimed: “Wandering spirits, if indeed ye wander, and do not rest in your narrow beds, allow me this faint happiness, or take me, as your companion, away from the joys of life.” As I said this, I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed. He bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution; his stature, also, as he approached, seemed to exceed that of man. (Shelley 1994, 519)

For a moment here, Shelley makes it seem as if the spirits have responded, and sent a messenger, so rapt is Frankenstein in his identification with the spirits of liberty, who, he is convinced, are the true dwellers in this landscape. But the landscape has emitted a spirit-messenger of another kind, his own special “filthy daemon” (Shelley 1994, 503), the gigantic charnel-house *doppelgänger* he has created, who ties him down irrevocably to earth, “a creature,” as he puts it later, “who could exist in the ice-caves of the glaciers” (Shelley 1994, 553), but who talks with a mixture of Rousseau’s emotional articulacy and Godwin’s moral acuity. It is Frankenstein himself who is threatened with usurpation. It is he who absurdly wants to “close with him in mortal combat” in the beginning of the scene to follow, and it is the creature who is the persuasive, rational being.

Mary Shelley, like Percy Shelley in his poetry, consistently uses the Greek spelling of “daemon” throughout the text, an archaic sign which placed the notion of a spirit, for the reader of this text, outside the simple reference to a Christian devil. The term alludes instead to the Neoplatonic tradition: