

FRANKENSTEIN AND MARY SHELLEY'S
“WET UNGENIAL SUMMER”

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Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has attracted a wide variety of interpretations, ranging from the Feminist, to the Marxist, to the Psychoanalytic. Some of these interpretations have relied on the scantiest of evidence while others are simply mistaken in their analysis of the period. Ecocriticism reminds us of the importance of nature in our understanding of literary and cultural texts, and this is never more appropriate than in an analysis of *Frankenstein*. It is well known that the idea for the novel emerged at the Villa Diodati, on the shores of Lake Geneva, during the stormy month of June 1816. So much is explained by Mary Shelley herself. It is not well known, however, that the stormy weather was the result of an Indonesian volcano, which affected the atmosphere of the northern hemisphere for three years, leading to crop failure, riots and starvation. Mary Shelley's other writings of the period, as well as *Frankenstein*, reveal her interest in, and concern for, nature and the countryside. To a large extent, the novel is a reflection of these concerns at a time when the natural world was in crisis.

Key words: ecocriticism, Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, English literature, nineteenth century novel, romanticism

“...beginning must be linked to something that went before”
(Mary Shelley 1998: 8)

The countryside so lovingly celebrated in the then Mary Godwin's early work, in particular in Switzerland, and subsequently recreated in *Frankenstein*, was devastated by a dramatic climate change between 1816 and 1818, when the novel was conceived and written. The aim of this paper is to show that the bad weather which kept Lord Byron, Mary Godwin, Percy Shelley and John Polidori indoors at the Villa Diodati in June 1816, and which Mary herself points to as the origin of the novel, has greater significance than is generally believed. Rather than representing the horrors of the Industrial Revolution, Victor Frankenstein's monster symbolises the capacity of nature to instigate environmental crises of biblical proportions.

Frankenstein is traditionally held to be a novel about getting “too clever with technology” (Butler 1996: 302), as is the idea that Mary Shelley “was writing at a time of phenomenal transformation in the productive and social structures of English society – in short, the transformation we call the ‘Industrial Revolution’” (Hindle 1994: 167).

Victor Frankenstein's workshop and the monstrous product which emerges from it symbolise both the horrors of unrestrained technology and the hellish conditions now associated with the process of nineteenth century industrial production itself. The popular belief, however, that early nineteenth century England was being transformed from a primarily rural and agricultural to an urban and industrial society must be challenged. While it is true that in 1784, thirteen years before Mary Godwin was born, "the world's most powerful steam engine was installed in London" (McKusick 2000: 97), and "over 100 steam engines were at work in London's flour mills, breweries, tanneries" (McKusick 2000: 98), by 1815, only a relatively small proportion of all the industrial workers were engaged in large factories, and most Englishmen lived in little towns and villages" (Thomson 1973: 117). As late as 1830, according to E.P. Thompson, "the characteristic industrial worker worked not in a mill or factory but (as an artisan or 'mechanic') in a small workshop or in his own home" (Thompson 1991: 259). John Stevenson suggests that more recent work "on economic growth ... would characterize an economy growing only gradually until the 1820s (Stevenson 1993: 231), while social critics prior to the 1830s "were primarily concerned with the agricultural labourer and the rural poor" (Stevenson 1993: 229). Despite this, critics such as Warren Montag argue that Shelley suppresses "the urban, the industrial and the proletarian" (Montag 1992: 310) in order to "turn backward toward a time of mutual (if unequal) obligation, to a time before the creation of monsters by the industrial order, a time when the human was regulated by the natural" (Montag 1992: 311). There is a certain confusion to Montag's thesis. It is not clear whether it is industrialisation itself which Shelley deliberately suppresses, or the concomitant industrial proletariat; whether Frankenstein's workshop, and its association with "Blake's 'dark satanic mills'" (Montag 1992: 309) is the true object of her horror, or the monster/working classes. In either case, neither the kind of steam-powered factory-based industry of Victorian England, nor the urban proletariat conjured up by Montag, existed in 1817 when Mary Shelley finished writing *Frankenstein*. Nor had Mary Godwin grown up in a place or period of great urban and industrial transformation: "I lived principally in the country as a girl, and passed a considerable time in Scotland" (Shelley 1998: 5), she explains in the 1831 Introduction to the novel. Britain, and Europe as a whole, was essentially rural and agrarian just as "Frankenstein's world is a world without industry, a rural world dominated by scenes of sublime natural beauty" (Montag 1992: 309). Indeed, neither industry nor the supposed horrors of urban life are mentioned by Mary Shelley. Not in *Frankenstein*, nor in her journals of the period, nor in her *History of a Six Weeks Tour*, published in 1817. True, she writes to Thomas Jefferson Hogg in April 1815 that "I shudder to think of breathing the air of London again" (Shelley 1995: 10), but this is a reference to the fact that the London Bailiffs are after Shelley for debt, rather than to the capital's smoky atmosphere. There is no evidence to suggest that Mary Shelley was concerned with industrialisation at all, other than by its ominously Derridean absence in her writing.

Ecocriticism, however, may be able to provide an alternative and less problematic explanation for both the genesis and meaning of *Frankenstein*. In his book *The Song of the Earth*, published in 2000, the English ecocritic, Jonathan Bate, makes the startling but convincing claim that Byron's poem 'Darkness' and Keats's ode 'To Autumn' were inspired by an Indonesian volcano. The facts, as outlined by Bate, are both simple and extraordinary:

...the eruption of Tambora volcano in Indonesia in 1815 killed some 80,000 people on the islands of Sumbawa and Lombok. It was the greatest eruption since 1500. The dust blasted into the stratosphere reduced the transparency of the atmosphere, filtered out the sun and consequently lowered surface temperatures. The effect lasted for three years straining the growth-capacity of life across the planet. Beginning in 1816, crop failure led to food riots in nearly every country in Europe. Only in 1819 were there good harvests again. (2000: 97)

'Darkness' was written at the Villa Diodati in the summer of 1816 when it "rained in Switzerland on 130 out of the 183 days from April to September ... The average temperature that July was an astonishing 4.9° Fahrenheit below the mean for that month in the years 1807-24" (Bate 2000: 96). When Byron wrote that "Morn came and went – and came, and brought no day" (Byron 1914: 6), far from being metaphorical, he was referring to the day to day reality of millions of people across the northern hemisphere at that time. Keats's 'To Autumn' on the other hand, which was written in September 1819 (Motion 1997: 457), celebrates the fact that the previous three years of appalling weather and failed harvests had finally come to an end: "the terrible summer and failed harvest of 1816, bad weather and poor harvests continuing in 1817 and 1818", led at last in 1819 to "a good summer, a full harvest, a beautiful autumn" (Bate 2000:102).

Rather more famously than 'Darkness', Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* also has its origins at the Villa Diodati in the early summer of 1816. In the Preface to the 1818 edition she (anonymously) explains that:

I passed the summer of 1816 in the environs of Geneva. The season was cold and rainy, and in the evenings we crowded around a blazing wood fire, and occasionally amused ourselves with some German stories of ghosts, which happened to fall into our hands. These tales excited in us a playful desire of imitation. Two other friends (a tale from the pen of one of whom would be far more acceptable to the public than any thing I can ever hope to produce) and myself agreed to write each a story, founded on some supernatural occurrence. (Shelley 1998:14)

Although Mary Shelley would later claim to have had the most difficulty in deciding what to write, she was undoubtedly the most successful when it came to finishing the work, the first draft of *Frankenstein* being completed in March 1817 (Dunn 1978: 153). The fact that a volcano caused the weather in the summer of 1816 to be sufficiently bad to keep the Byron-Shelley circle indoors reading ghost stories, which then led to the idea of their writing ghost stories themselves, which led in turn to the composition of *Frankenstein* may seem, perhaps, to be of merely anecdotal interest. The unusual

weather, however, which persisted throughout 1816 and 1817 when the novel was being written is, I would argue, of great assistance to our understanding of the work.

The storms which ravaged Europe in the spring and summer of 1816 are mentioned at length by Mary Shelley. On May 17th 1816 she described her journey from Paris to Geneva in a letter to her half-sister Fanny Imlay:

The dashing of the invisible mountain streams announced to us that we had quitted the plains of France, as we slowly ascended, amidst a violent storm of wind and rain, to Champagnolles ... The spring, as the inhabitants informed us, was unusually late, and indeed the cold was excessive; as we ascended the mountains, the same clouds which rained on us in the vallies [sic] poured forth large flakes of snow thick and fast (Shelley 1995: 12).

Years later, Mary Shelley, while providing information for Thomas Moore's *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron* (1830), again makes much of the weather, claiming that it disrupted Byron's and Shelley's plans to sail on Lake Geneva:

When the weather did not allow of their excursions after dinner,—an occurrence not unfrequent during this very wet summer,—the inmates of the cottage passed their evenings at Diodati, and, when the rain rendered it inconvenient for them to return home, remained there to sleep. (Shelley 1987: 108)

In the fragments which survive of her Geneva journal of June and July 1816 we learn of a ferry overturning in the lake, drowning “two women, two cows & twelve black pigs” (Shelley 1987: 111) while “violent wind & intervals of rain” (Shelley 1987: 111) set in and prevent them from sightseeing. On July 21st 1816 they finally set out on a much delayed trip to Chamounix [sic], but remain dogged by the weather: “we had passed the torrent here in the morning”, she reports at one point, but “the torrents had torn away the road and it was with difficulty we crossed” (Shelley: 1987: 115). Three days later it is raining again: “Wednesday 24th. Today is rainy therefore we cannot go to Col du Baume ... It began to rain almost as soon as we left our inn ... The rain continued in torrents – we were wetted to the skin ... We arrived wetted to the skin ... Friday 26. We determine to return today as it rained and we could not possibly go to Col de Balme as we intended” (Shelley 1987: 115-119). August was not much better. Plans to send up a balloon are disappointed: “we go out in the boat to set up the baloon [sic] but there is too much wind ... Thursday 15th. Go out in the boat a little way with Shelley but it is stormy and we soon return – a rainy day” (Shelley 1987: 123-125).

Some of her descriptions were later incorporated into the novel. In another letter to her sister Fanny, on June 1st 1816, Mary wrote:

The thunder storms that visit us are grander and more terrific than I have ever seen before. We watch them as they approach from the opposite side of the lake, observing the lightning play among the clouds in various parts of the heavens, and dart in jagged figures upon the piny heights of Jura, dark with the shadow of the overhanging cloud, while perhaps the sun is shining cheerily upon us. One night we *enjoyed* a finer storm than I had ever before beheld. The lake was lit up – the pines on Jura made visible, and all the scene illuminated for an instant, when a pitchy blackness succeeded, and the thunder came in frightful bursts over our heads amid the darkness. (Shelley 1995: 15)

This storm reappears twice in *Frankenstein*, firstly as a boyhood memory:

When I was about fifteen years old we had retired to our house near Belrive, when we witnessed a most violent and terrible thunder-storm. It advanced from behind the mountain of Jura; and the thunder burst at once with frightful loudness from various quarters of the heavens. I remained, while the storm lasted, watching its progress with curiosity and delight. As I stood at the door, on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump. (Shelley 1998: 41)

The second thunderstorm occurs after Victor has created the monster:

I quitted my seat, and walked on, although the darkness and storm increased every minute, and the thunder burst with a terrific crash over my head. It was echoed from Salève, the Juras, and the Alps of Savoy; vivid flashes of lightning dazzled my eyes, illuminating the lake, making it appear like a vast sheet of fire; then for an instant everything seemed of a pitchy darkness, until the storm recovered itself from the preceding flash. The storm, as is often the case in Switzerland, appeared at once in various parts of the heavens. The most violent storm hung exactly north of the town, over that part of the lake which lies between the promontory of Belrive and the village of Copêt. Another storm enlightened Jura with faint flashes; and another darkened and sometimes disclosed the Môle, a peaked mountain to the east of the lake (Shelley 1998: 76).

What is interesting about this second storm is the sudden appearance of the monster: "A flash of lightning illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy dæmon, to whom I had given life" (Shelley 1998: 76). It is as if the storm were responsible for the creature's existence: it is 'illuminated' and 'discovered' by the lightning in a rather similar way to later cinematic depictions of the monster's birth. In a way, the film versions of *Frankenstein* are right: the weather, with its frequent electrical storms, which kept all indoors at the Villa Diodati in June 1816, led directly to the monster's genesis.

In the novel, Victor Frankenstein rather despondently explains that "I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the life-less thing that lay at my feet" (Shelley 1998: 57). Yet this too, the idea of a mere spark engendering life, emerged from the Villa Diodati confinement. Conversation in the

house turned, not surprisingly, perhaps, considering the prevalence of natural electricity in the form of lightning all around them, to the ideas of Abernethy and Lawrence, the former having proposed “that the superadded life-element is analogous to electricity” (Butler 1996: 307). We know that Mary Shelley took an interest in the scientific and technological developments of her day, reporting that she was reading *Introduction to Davy’s Chemistry* during October and November 1816 (Shelley 1987: 142-4). According to Marilyn Butler, William Lawrence, a professor at the Royal College of Surgeons in London, a leading theorist on anatomy and physiology, and a friend of the couple, “probably ensured that both Shelleys wrote more accurately and less speculatively on scientific matters than they otherwise might” (Butler 1996: 305). In a similar vein Anne K. Mellor claims that:

The works of three of the most famous scientists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century – Humphry Davy, Erasmus Darwin, and Luigi Galvani – together with the teachings of two of their most ardent disciples, Adam Walker and Percy Shelley, were crucial to Mary Shelley’s understanding of science and the scientific enterprise (Mellor 1995: 108).

The combination, then, of the bad weather, beginning in 1816, and interest in the latest scientific discoveries, shared, it seems, by the whole party, only needed the challenge of a supernatural story to be written by all, to provide the catalyst.

There is, however, a further ingredient required. Mary Shelley’s supernatural story, as Walter Montag quite rightly explains, takes place in “a world without industry, a rural world dominated by scenes of sublime natural beauty”. It is not surprising, then, to find in Mary Shelley’s earlier works evidence for her great interest in nature and the countryside. It is also clear, in *History of a Six Weeks Tour*, for example, that her interest is not merely aesthetic. Shortly after arriving in France, she remarks that the “first appearance that struck our English eyes was the want of enclosures; but the fields were flourishing with a plentiful harvest” (Shelley 1991: 10). This comment is interesting in that, first, it implies a familiarity with the question of enclosure and, secondly, suggests that despite ‘the want of enclosures’ the harvest looked plentiful. In other words, Mary Shelley apparently believed that enclosure, a central plank of the so-called agricultural revolution, was beneficial. For someone of her class, this was undoubtedly true: enclosure created hardship for an unlucky percentage of the population that lived and worked on the land; Mary did neither, but she did have, through Percy, heir to the Shelley family’s Sussex estate, an interest in land ownership and management. Most of France, however, lay in ruins: “Nothing could be more entire”, she cries at the depredations of the Cossacs [sic], “than the ruin which these barbarians had spread as they advanced; perhaps they remembered Moscow and the destruction of the Russian villages; but we were now in France, and the distress of the inhabitants, whose houses had been burned, their cattle killed, and all their wealth destroyed, has given a sting to my detestation of war” (Shelley 1991: 19). These scenes are largely repeated as they journey through France and there is little relief until the frontier with Switzerland is crossed.

The rural world described in *Frankenstein* largely reflects Mary Shelley's travels through Germany, Switzerland and Italy. On his journey to London, Victor Frankenstein travels down the Rhine valley and is delighted by the scene: "flourishing vineyards, with green sloping banks, and a meandering river, and populous towns occupy the scene. // We travelled at the time of the vintage, and heard the song of the labourers, as we glided down the stream" (Shelley 1998: 155). This coincides with the description given in *History of a Six Weeks Tour*, in which "memory, taking all the dark shades from the picture, presents this part of the Rhine to my remembrance as the loveliest paradise on Earth" (Shelley 1991: 69). At other times, in the novel, the prosperity of one region is compared to the poverty of another. In Orkney, Victor Frankenstein thinks of Switzerland: "it was far different from this desolate and appalling landscape. Its hills are covered with vines, and its cottages are scattered thickly in the plains. Its fair lakes reflect a blue and gentle sky; and when troubled by the winds, their tumult is but as the play of a lively infant, when compared to the roarings of the giant ocean" (Shelley 1998: 164). In *History of a six weeks tour* it is France which is compared unfavourably with Switzerland where the "cottages are much cleaner and neater, and the inhabitants exhibit the same contrast" (Shelley 1991: 40). In Italy, nothing but hardship is observed as, early in *Frankenstein*, we are introduced to Elizabeth Lavenza's family, "a peasant and his wife, hard working, bent down by care and labour, distributing a scanty meal to five hungry babes" (Shelley 1998: 34). Elizabeth, it emerges, is not actually of peasant stock, but the child of a Milanese nobleman who is either dead or in prison, and the paternalistic Frankenstein family, having learned of her lineage, do not hesitate to adopt her as their own. In England, observations of the countryside are largely reserved for sites of interest to a Romantic tourist which, indeed, is what Victor Frankenstein is. Windsor forest is visited (influenced by Pope's poem 'Windsor Forest' perhaps?), and declared "beautiful" (Shelley 1998: 159), the colleges of Oxford are "ancient and picturesque" (Shelley 1998: 160), the cave at Matlock is "wondrous" (Shelley 1998: 161), while the Lake District, home of the Wordsworths and the Lake Poets, recalls the mountains of Switzerland.

Mary, then, was both keenly interested in, and keenly observant of, rural life. Her concerns are those typical of her class: she exhibits the fashionable though paternalistic liberal humanism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in her fictional depiction of Elizabeth Lavenza's adoption, and in her approval of Swiss cottagers. Her delight in the mountains of Switzerland, as expressed both in *Frankenstein* and in *History of a Six Weeks Tour* are those of a tourist of the picturesque, again, typical of her class, but are also a reflection of her political sympathies. Victor Frankenstein, in a passage added to the novel by Percy Bysshe Shelley (Hindle 1985: 269), claims that the "republican institutions of our country have produced simpler and happier manners than those which prevail in the great monarchies that surround it" (Shelley 1998: 65). This was a view that Mary presumably shared, since she had already made similar comments to Fanny Imlay in her letter from Geneva of June 1816: "There is more equality of classes here than in England. This occasions a greater freedom and refinement of manners among the lower orders than we meet with in our own country" (Shelley 1995: 16). In France, meanwhile, the war had left the land desolate, while in England, although *Frankenstein* refers only to popular Romantic beauty spots, rural poverty, crime and homelessness were increasing alarmingly during the period that the

novel was being written. “The autumn of 1816 was a period of extreme misery and post-war unemployment” (1991: 693), explains E.P. Thompson, in which the artisans of town and country joined with unemployed agricultural labourers, discharged soldiers and shipless seamen to demand reform. Mary Godwin (shortly to become Mary Shelley on December 30th, 1816) was in the habit of reading the newspapers, and reports in a letter to Shelley on December 5th that the “morning Chronicle as you will see does not make much of the [Spa-field] riots which they say are entirely quieted” (Shelley 1995: 18), confirming that she was perfectly aware of the increasing unrest in the country, as is also implied by the couple’s growing friendship with Leigh Hunt, who had been imprisoned in 1813 for libelling the Prince Regent, and by Shelley’s own well-known political views.

Only the republic of Switzerland, it seemed, remained prosperous and beautiful. Yet even there, in 1816 (and unlike the Switzerland previously visited in 1814) it was now dark and stormy, its beauties hidden behind sheets of rain and dark clouds, and its harvests failing. According to Jonathan Bate, “annual harvests for that country [Switzerland] have been graded by economic historians on a scale of one to six, according to yield. 1816 achieved a minimal one. As a result of the poor harvests, there was a hemispheric subsistence crisis, marked by violent price fluctuation, basic food shortages and concordant public disorder” (Bate 2000: 97). Mary Godwin left Switzerland with Shelley for London on August 29th (Shelley 1995: 370). The certain failure of the Swiss harvest must have long been known to them and everyone else around Lake Geneva. A spring and summer of extraordinarily low temperatures and non-stop rain could have left no-one in doubt. Even Switzerland, the republic happily free of the worst ravages of war and economic crisis was not to be spared.

Does the monster, then, represent the weather? Certainly, the gothic gloom of the novel may well be a reflection of the meteorological conditions under which the novel was conceived and written. And the monster undoubtedly destroys everything that his creator loves, just as the weather seemed to be destroying those parts of the world – the rural world, including German vineyards, Swiss cottages and English beauty spots – that Mary Godwin had held dear. The beauties of the landscape depicted in *Frankenstein* were culled largely from Mary Shelley’s memories of her travels across Europe, at a period when the sun still shone and the rain and cold did not obliterate everything from sight. Perhaps *Frankenstein* is nothing more than this. A novel inspired by a coincidence of circumstances: the challenge to write a supernatural story, books and conversation about the properties of electricity, storms, lightning and darkness, war-torn landscapes, rural poverty, hunger and starvation. But it also demonstrates the importance of nature and the environment.

It is surely no coincidence that the monster’s movements are perpetually mountainwards and northwards, towards the cold, barren places where human survival, indeed life itself, is threatened, and ultimately extinguished, just as much life in the northern hemisphere between 1816 and 1818 was similarly threatened and extinguished by darkness and cold. After being seen in the lightning flash of the storm (Shelley 1998: 76), the monster next confronts *Frankenstein* on a mountaintop near Mont Blanc. The association with ice and mountains is made clear: “The desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge. I have wandered here many days; the caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me, and the only one which man

does not grudge" (Shelley 1998: 146). Despite being constructed of flesh and bone (albeit second hand), the monster is able to withstand the cold and hunger of his domain; it is as if he has shed his material origins and become the spirit of the 'desert mountains and dreary glaciers'. This is followed by a meeting in the "desolate and appalling landscape" (Shelley 1998: 208) of the Orkneys and the murder of Frankenstein's closest friend, Henry Cerval. On returning to Switzerland, Frankenstein marries his fiancée Elizabeth, only for her to be murdered in her bridal chamber. Frankenstein's response is to seek vengeance and the novel concludes with his pursuit of the monster ever northwards, to the Arctic Sea. In a message left by the creature Frankenstein reads: "Follow me; I seek the everlasting ices of the north, where you will feel the misery of cold and frost, to which I am impassive" (Shelley 1998: 248). The monster's world of ice and cold has become Frankenstein's too, where he dies, his body snatched up by the creature and "borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance" (Shelley 1998: 265). Everyone close to Frankenstein is touched by the hand of death, just as the natural world between 1816 and 1818 lay moribund beneath a cold, black sky. The monster's behaviour, together with his ability to withstand unbelievable hardship and deprivation, clearly sets him apart from humanity. His indifference towards his victims, at least until the final chapter, is the indifference of a force of nature, capable neither of remorse, nor of rational justification; a monstrous volcano of destruction, spreading darkness and despair wherever he passes, like an angel of death. Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, then, attempts to give meaning to a natural disaster, just as Tambora provided the inspiration for a novel.

Jonathan Bate argues that the "weather is the primary sign of the inextricability of culture and nature" (Bate 2000: 102). We cannot afford to leave environmental questions out of our analysis of cultural and literary texts, just as we cannot afford to neglect the environment in our day to day life, in the management of the economy, in politics, or in anything regarding our society and our lives. If we do, nature has a habit of reminding us it is there, just as the monster, a force of nature perverted by human ingenuity, is constantly reminding Victor Frankenstein of his existence, just as the tsunami of December 26th 2004, and the Pakistan earthquake of October 10th 2005, remind us that we inhabit a world we do not control.

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