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Judith Weissman

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A Reading of Frankenstein as the Complaint of a Political Wife

by JUDITH WEISSMAN

Many twentieth century horror movies, as we all know, are metaphorical warnings about some political danger, usually communism. The makers of movies like The Green Slime and It Conquered the World certainly know what they are doing as they disguise the political idea as some kind of monster that destroys men or takes over their minds, and apparently they feel no guilt or ambivalence about their villains. Frankenstein, the ancestor of all the stories of mad scientists and their monstrous creations which have haunted us since the beginning of the nineteenth century, can also be seen as a disguised political warning. Mary Shelley, the daughter of one radical man and the wife of another, who adored and was influenced by both,1 was certainly no cynical right-wing propagandist; but her book nevertheless suggests a distinct, though perhaps unconscious, unhappiness with the revolutionary politics of her husband and his political predecessors.

Many critics have pointed out that Victor Frankenstein resembles Percy Shelley, and Christopher Small has studied the similarities exhaustively, even noticing such details as that Victor was a youthful pseudonym of Shelley’s and that Elizabeth is the name of both Frankenstein’s adopted sister and Shelley’s favorite sister;2 but no one has really discussed the hostility, on Mary’s part, which is implied in the resemblance. Mary makes Frankenstein moody, wild, delicate, excessively sensitive, and enthusiastic, as Shelley is supposed to have been. Frankenstein even describes himself with one of Shelley’s favorite images for himself, the wounded fawn: “the wounded deer dragging its fainting limbs to some untrodden brake there to gaze upon the arrow which had pierced it, and to die—was but a type of me.”3

Even more significant and striking than the general similarities in

1. Among the critics and biographers who have discussed the positive political influences of Godwin and Shelley on Mary’s thought are Eileen Bigland, in Mary Shelley (London, 1959); Wilfred Cude, in “Mary Shelley’s Modern Prometheus, A Study in the Ethics of Scientific Creativity” (Dalhousie Review, LII, 212-255); Noel B. Gerson, in Daughter of Earth and Water, A Biography of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (New York, 1974); Christopher Small, in Ariel Like a Harpy, Shelley, Mary, and Frankenstein (London, 1972); and William Walling, in Mary Shelley (New York, 1974).
2. Small, pp. 100-121.

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temperament between Shelley and Frankenstein are their similarities as scientists. Frankenstein tells Walton about his childhood fascination with magic and the writings of Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magnus: “under the guidance of my new preceptors, I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life; but the latter soon obtained my undivided attention. Wealth was an inferior object; but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death” (p. 40). He says that he was also fascinated with the power of electricity and with necromancy: “the raising of ghosts or devils was a promise liberally accorded by my favourite authors, the fulfillment of which I most eagerly sought; and if my incantations were always unsuccessful, I attributed the failure rather to my own inexperience and mistake, than to a want of skill or fidelity in my instructors” (p. 40). Frankenstein’s descriptions of himself are practically a paraphrase of Thomas Jefferson Hogg’s descriptions of Shelley:

He [Shelley] was passionately attached to the study of what used to be called the occult sciences, conjointly with that of the new wonders, which chemistry and natural philosophy have displayed to us. His pocket money was spent in the purchase of books relative to these darling pursuits—of chemical apparatus and materials. The books consisted of treatises on magic and witchcraft, as well as those more modern ones detailing the miracles of electricity and galvanism. Sometimes he watched the livelong night for ghosts. At his father’s house, where his influence was, of course, great among the dependants, he even planned how he might get admission to the vault, or charnel house, at Warnham Church, and might sit there all night, harrowed by fear, yet trembling with expectation, to see one of the spiritualised owners of the bones piled around him. . . . No ghost appeared, but for the credit of glamour-books, he did not doubt that the incantation failed from some mistake of his own.4

After a period of disillusionment with science, Frankenstein, as he tells Walton, regained his interest in it at the University of Ingolstadt, where he discovered that being a modern scientist did not mean giving up the grandiose dreams of the ancient occult philosophers. Christopher Small suggests the political and philosophical significance of the place where this change occurs in Frankenstein when he observes that “Ingolstadt . . . was the university where the revolutionary secret society of the Illuminati, a romantic conspiracy which exercised a strong fascination upon Shelley especially, was formed in 1776.”5 It was there, after two years of ceaseless study and labor, that Frankenstein discovered the secret of life which enabled him to create a living being, a being which he hoped would be a blessing to the world. “Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a

5. Small, p. 43.
torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me” (p. 54). And Shelley, in his years at Oxford, also believed that science was connected with political liberation. Hogg says that he dreamed of new forms of power and new ways of exploration, and that he even speculated that if Africa were explored, “the shadow of the first balloon, which a vertical sun would project precisely underneath it, as it glided silently over that hitherto unhappy country, would virtually emancipate every slave, and would annihilate slavery forever.”

Just how this emancipation would occur Shelley apparently neglected to explain to his skeptical friend, who comments that “his speculations were as wild as the experience of twenty-one years has shown them to be.” Hogg himself, though impressed by Shelley, studied, and urged Shelley to study, the moral rather than the physical sciences, and therefore may be Mary Shelley’s model for Frankenstein’s adolescent friend Clerval, who “occupied himself, so to speak, with the moral relations of things” (p. 38). No absolutely certain inferences can be drawn, of course, from similarities between fictional characters and characters whom an author knew; but the similarities between Shelley and Frankenstein are striking enough to suggest at least the possibility that Mary says things about Shelley in her fiction which she never allows herself to say about him openly.

The other biographical clue which must be connected with the portrayal of Shelley as the mad scientist is the similarity between events in the lives of the Shelleys just before and during the period when Mary was writing Frankenstein, and events in the book. The monster expressed his hatred for his creator by murdering members of his family: he strangled William, Frankenstein’s youngest brother; falsely implicated Justine, a servant who was practically a member of the family, so that she was executed for the murder; later strangled Clerval, and then Elizabeth, Frankenstein’s bride, and therefore precipitated the death of the broken-hearted father. Seemingly gratuitous deaths in the family also overwhelmed Shelley and Mary in 1815 and 1816. Mary’s first baby, a girl, died suddenly in 1815; in 1816 both Fanny Imlay, Mary’s half-sister, and Harriet Shelley, Shelley’s wife, committed suicide.

Adults can know intellectually that deaths are not their fault, but no one ever entirely escapes from the child’s fantasy that someone must be to blame for all unhappiness. Mary obviously would not have wanted to blame herself or Shelley for the deaths—or, in the case of Fanny, her

7. Ibid.
8. Small discusses the similarity of events in the life of Shelley and Mary and in Frankenstein (pp. 206-7).
9. Small writes in great detail about Shelley’s image of himself as blameless and his refusal to accept any guilt for deaths in the family (pp. 171-195). Mary’s conscious idealization of Shelley clearly follows his idealization of himself; but Small does not pursue the idea that she may have been subconsciously blaming him.
adored father; and so perhaps to express both guilt and anger she created a monster twice removed from her husband, but still related to him, on whom she could project her wishes to blame someone. The death of a child is a classic, even mythological cause for a wife's irrational anger at her husband, and Mary Shelley may have turned her husband into a madman in her story instead of killing him, like Clytemnestra, or withdrawing into cold hatred like the wife in Frost's "Home Burial." And it is difficult for me to imagine that Mary herself felt no guilt for Harriet's death, though her letters and journals mention no such feelings, for she did, after all, elope with Harriet's husband. The only woman in Frankenstein with whom Mary might have identified is Elizabeth, blameless, pure, loving, devoted to Frankenstein—and murdered by the monster, his creation, on their wedding night. In at least one place Mary did reveal that she felt terribly hurt by the events that took place during her life with Shelley, if not by Shelley himself. She said in her journal entry on August 4, 1819, after her son William died (and two years after she wrote Frankenstein), "I begin my Journal on Shelley's birthday. We have now lived five years together; and if all the events of the five years were blotted out, I might be happy; but to have won, and then cruelly to have lost the associations of four years, is not an accident to which the human mind can bend without much suffering." Perhaps some of that suffering produced Frankenstein and his monster.

Still, biographical and psychological conjectures suggest only a possible motive behind the book. The next question, as in the analysis of a dream, must be why these feelings took this particular form. The subtitle of the book, The Modern Prometheus, suggests that it is part of a literary argument between the Shelleys over the meaning of the myth of Prometheus. Mary wrote Frankenstein in 1816 and 1817, and Shelley wrote Prometheus Unbound in 1818 and 1819; and the most obvious inspiration for both works is the poem "Prometheus" of their friend Byron (1816), who did not invent an ending for the story of Prometheus.

10. Bigland reprints and discusses the astonishingly cold letter that Godwin wrote to Shelley and Mary, asking them to help him hush up Fanny's suicide, and Mary's inordinately grateful response to this first letter from her father since her elopement (p. 97). Mary's repression and transformation of anger toward her radical father surely fed into her feelings toward her husband, but to pursue the subject would be the business of another essay.


12. Among the critics who discuss the connections among the Promethean figures of Byron, Shelley, and Mary Shelley are Walling (pp. 44-5); P. D. Fleck, in "Mary Shelley's Notes to Shelley's Poems and Frankenstein" (Studies in Romanticism, VI, 226-54); Harold Bloom, in "Frankenstein, or The New Prometheus" (Partisan Review, XXXII (1965), 611-618); and Christopher Small. Walling sees Mary's novel as "a transitional point between the Byronic view of Prometheus (as evidenced in his short poem) and the Shelleyan transformation of the Titan in Prometheus Unbound," evading, I think the truly negative meaning of Mary's Prometheus, as Bloom and Fleck also do. Small devotes an entire chapter to the connections between Frankenstein and Prometheus Unbound, but he reads Shelley superficially and with little reference to politics, which is my focus.
theus, but simply characterized him as the eternal, though hopeless, revolutionary, forever defying an unjust god for the sake of suffering mankind.

Shelley and Mary developed the story of Prometheus in ways that are superficially parallel but which give their stories absolutely different meanings. In both books the Prometheus character gives power to someone who is supposed to aid the human race and finds both himself and the human race tyrannized by the supposed benefactor. Frankenstein imagines that his super-human creature will be the father of a beneficent race that will improve life on earth; Prometheus gives power to Jupiter so that Jupiter can overthrow Saturn, under whose rule man was not free intellectually. The monster, rejected by Frankenstein as soon as it comes to life, haunts Frankenstein and kills his family; Jupiter, as soon as he gains power, chains Prometheus to an icy mountain and torments the human race. Both Frankenstein and Prometheus become entrapped in their own feelings of vengeance and hatred toward the tyrants whom they create and utter rather similar vows of eternal revenge. Frankenstein swears by the earth, the shades, his own grief, night, and the spirits of night, to pursue the monster to the death, and calls on the spirits of the dead and of vengeance to help him: "let the cursed and hellish monster drink deep of agony; let him feel the despair that now torments me" (p. 202). Prometheus calls on the earth to repeat to him his curse, but the earth tells him that he must hear it from the Phantasm of Jupiter, called up from the realm of Demogorgon, which is both the world of ghosts and metaphorically, the subconscious. In the first two stanzas of the curse Prometheus calls on Jupiter to torture him as much as he can, for he will remain defiant; and in the second two, he calls exactly similar tortures down on Jupiter.

I curse thee! Let a sufferer's curse
Clasp thee, his torturer, like remorse!
Till thine Infinity shall be
A robe of envenomed agony;
And thine Omnipotence a crown of pain,
To cling like burning gold round thy dissolving brain.\(^{18}\)

Shelley, by making the source of Prometheus' words the hated object as it exists in his own subconscious, and by making the curse reflexive—Prometheus and Jupiter are doing identical things to each other—indicates that the true tyranny from which Prometheus must free himself is not another being, but a structure of his own mind.

Shelley's Prometheus, who is also the spirit of Greece, the embittered spirit of the French Revolution, and the collective rational mind of the human race, can redeem himself, and by extension, the human race,

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through repentance and through love. He repents of his wish to hurt Jupiter after he hears the curse; he goes through a period of despair after the furies remind him of the harm that has come from the two great attempts to benefit the human race since the time of ancient Greece—the coming of Christ and the French Revolution. But after the chorus of spirits reminds him that the impulses of benevolence and love cannot be eradicated by the unfortunate outcome of a particular action, he once again becomes ready to love and to seek his wife, Asia, who is simultaneously a culture necessary to complete Greek culture, the female spirit, and the human heart and imagination. After Asia has undergone her own purgation by traveling to the realm of Demogorgon, and the two elements of the human spirit are reunited, tyranny is banished. Oppressive political structures can be eradicated by changes within human beings in Shelley's poem, as they can in the writings of William Godwin.

The Promethean spirit of Victor Frankenstein is allowed no such salvation. Both he and the monster do repent, at the last possible minute, and wish for each other's forgiveness, but Mary does not build up to or explain their respective changes of heart. Nor does she allow Victor to gain anything through Elizabeth, his saintly sister and wife of one day, who has the same symbolic role as Asia—"she was the living spirit of love to soften and attract" (p. 38). When Victor is absorbed in his deadly scientific venture, he is cut off, as Prometheus is in the first act of *Prometheus Unbound*, from both nature and love: "my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature, and the same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget those friends who were so many miles absent, and whom I had not seen for so long a time" (p. 55). But the crucial difference is that Shelley's Prometheus is isolated, unable to love, after he is embittered by Jupiter's betrayal of him; Frankenstein is unable to love while he is still creating the monster, who returns to kill his bride on their wedding night. It is too late for Frankenstein to seek salvation through love; apparently the very quest for scientific knowledge and the very attempt to give some radically new help to the human race irreparably damage his capability for human relationships.

In *Prometheus Unbound* Jupiter has no real character; but in *Frankenstein* the monster is the most interesting character, and the one who most clarifies the meaning of Frankenstein's irremediable mistake. The monster can, of course, be interpreted in other than political terms. L.J. Swingle sees it as a Romantic Stranger which challenges the mind's categories of thought ("Frankenstein's Monster and Its Romantic Relatives: Problems of Knowledge in English Romanticism," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, XV, 51-66). Harold Bloom thinks that it epitomizes the despair caused by Romantic self-consciousness; Wilfred Cude sees it as the power of science divorced from human responsibility. Christopher Small interprets it in vaguely Jungian terms, calling it "the projection of Frankenstein's (and Shelley's own) shadow" (p. 293), a being who represents something repressed which the whole human race must finally acknowledge as its own.
original character and subsequent development of the monster come straight from Rousseau’s first great revolutionary essay, the *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality*. The monster, before he begins his story, compares himself to both Adam and Satan, the characters of Christian myth whom Rousseau explains in a new way in his discourse—the true original man, and the true cause of his fall. The monster’s first memories are of confused sense impressions, then of the discovery of sources of food and water, and of distinguishing night and day and different plants and animals—the activities of Rousseau’s natural man. He then discovers fire, and after shocking a few people by his appearance he settles down in a hut next to the home of a family. At first he has only the two instincts which Rousseau says are basic to both human beings and animals, self preservation and pity. As soon as he realizes that he has been causing the family to suffer by stealing their food, he stops, and even assists them by gathering wood for them. He goes beyond these two instincts by watching the family, from whom he learns familial affection, which Rousseau believes is the first social feeling. He also, conveniently, learns speech from them (the origin of which Rousseau finds it impossible to determine).

He begins to understand a social structure beyond that of the family when Felix teaches his Arabian woman friend Safie from Volney’s *Ruins of Empires*, and comments on what he has learned of human history from the point of view of Rousseau’s original man: “for a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow, or even why there were laws and governments; but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased, and I turned away with disgust and loathing” (p. 119). Having learned to read, again through Felix’s lessons, he discovers true social virtues in Plutarch: “I felt the greatest ardour for virtue rise within me, and abhorrence for vice, as far as I understood the significance of these terms, relative as they were, as I applied them, to pleasure and pain alone. I was of course led to admire peaceable law-givers, Numa, Solon, and Lycurgus, in preference to Romulus and Theseus” (p. 129). These are the law-givers who initiate the few periods of history during which Rousseau says, in *The Social Contract*, people were truly virtuous, for natural man is neither good nor bad, and people in societies which have advanced beyond the stage of the original true social contract are corrupt.

If the monster is Rousseau’s natural man, then Frankenstein himself is at least partly Rousseau, the first romantic revolutionary, the spiritual ancestor of Godwin and Shelley. Though the most obvious reason that

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15. Burton R. Pollin, in “Philosophical and Literary Sources of *Frankenstein*” (*Comparative Literature*, XVII, 97-108), and Mary Graham Lund, in “Mary Godwin Shelley and the Monster” (*University of Kansas City Review*, XXVII, 253-8), have mentioned that the ideas of Rousseau are a source for Mary’s picture of the development of the monster but have not suggested that the monster is an emblem of the revolution that developed out of Rousseau’s ideas.
much of *Frankenstein* is set in Geneva is that Mary was there when she conceived the story, Geneva is also the birthplace of Rousseau, and therefore, in a way, of the French Revolution, as Mary herself notes in a letter of June 1, 1816, in which she describes part of the city: “Here a small obelisk is erected to the glory of Rousseau, and here (such is the mutability of human life) the magistrates, the successors of those who exiled him from his native country, were shot by the populace during that revolution which his writings mainly contributed to mature, and which, notwithstanding the temporary bloodshed and injustice with which it was polluted, has produced enduring benefits to mankind, which not all the chicanery of statesmen, nor even the greatest conspiracy of kings, can entirely render vain.”

The view of the French Revolution implied in *Frankenstein*, however, is not so favorable. Having developed the monster’s moral sense as Rousseau says that the moral sense of the human race developed, Mary abruptly puts him into conflict with the corrupt men of the present or recent past. He ceases to follow his instinctive sympathy for other creatures when his carefully planned approach to the blind father of the family, who cannot see his ugliness, is interrupted by Felix, who beats him. The terrified family then abandons their home; “my protectors had departed, and had broken the only link that held me to the world. For the first time the feelings of revenge and hatred filled my bosom, and I did not strive to control them; but, allowing myself to be borne away by the stream, I bent my mind towards injury and death” (p. 138). Rousseau does not describe any such sudden transformation of the natural man into a vicious monster, but believes that human viciousness grew slowly as the division of labor caused the stratification of societies. So at this point in *Frankenstein* the monster seems to stop being the natural man himself and to become the idea of the natural man, an idea with utopian implications, which first became destructive during the French Revolution. The fact that the de Lacey family is French, not Swiss, and that the first language which the monster learns is French, has no bearing whatsoever on the story; but it may be an indication that the destruction which follows the natural man’s attempt to introduce himself to the human race is emblematic of events that took place in France.

After killing members of Frankenstein’s family in Switzerland, where, as Mary mentions in her letter of June 1, 1816, there was also revolutionary violence, the monster follows Frankenstein to England, where Frankenstein begins to work on the mate which the monster demands in exchange for future peace. He reconsiders, and destroys the mate, upon realizing the monster’s true evil; this abortive episode may reflect the fears of many English people, including William Godwin, that they would be overwhelmed by a violent revolution like the one in France.

The most troublesome problem in trying to make a coherent political interpretation of *Frankenstein* is finding a metaphorical meaning for the monster's ugliness. If he had looked like a normal human being, presumably he would not have been rejected and would have remained virtuous. The monster's ugliness, if it stands for anything, must stand for whatever keeps people from looking beyond the threatening appearance of something new and seeing its true goodness. It is wrong, certainly, for people to reject the monster at first, and yet they apparently cannot help their instinctive reaction of horror. This reaction suggests the old right-wing line that the human race is not “ready” (and probably never will be) for radical change, no matter how noble that change might be. As one Chicago political boss put it, “Chicago ain’t ready for reform.” *Frankenstein* implies that although Rousseau’s new and radical idea about human nature may be right, the human race cannot accept it.

The psychological and political meanings of *Frankenstein* merge in Mary’s idea of how the monster—or Rousseau’s image of man—or the French Revolution—was produced. It is the product of male science and reason rather than of the love of two parents in a family. Mary herself was a motherless child, her mother having died virtually in childbirth, and she puts great emotional power into the voice of the monster, an image of isolation. He complains bitterly that he is alone, without a family, and claims that he could have been good if he were not alone—and indeed, could still be, with a mate. The family is the ultimate value in *Frankenstein*. The families of Frankenstein’s mother, Elizabeth, Justine, de Lacey, and Saphie are all damaged by trauma—economic, legal, political; but Frankenstein’s family and the de Lacey family offer the only source of protection and warmth in a dangerous world. It is appropriate that the monster destroys Frankenstein’s family, for he is the incarnation of the violation of family ties—a child without a mother, produced by science rather than love.

Other Romantics, like Shelley and Wordsworth, share Mary’s belief that the French Revolution went wrong because it was too masculine, too intellectual, and cut people off from the past and from their own feelings. But Mary, instead of trying to create a spiritually improved version of the revolution, as Shelley does in *Prometheus Unbound* and Wordsworth does in the *Prelude*, rejects it entirely in *Frankenstein*. She has no illusions about the state of human justice, as she shows in the trials of Justine and de Lacey, and yet the monster, with all his good intentions, is able to alleviate no injustice whatsoever. The book as a whole supports the little sermon which Frankenstein preaches to Walton, another scientist who dreams of helping the human race:

17. Wilfred Cude says that the real villain in *Frankenstein* is the human race, which rejects the monster; but I see no evidence that Mary Shelley thought it was possible for them to do otherwise.
A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquillity. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule were always observed, if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquillity of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed. (pp. 55-56)

The causal connection between betrayal of domestic affections and this odd assortment of political disasters is both mysterious and novel. It is no doubt true that if every soldier who fought in the Peloponnesian War, Julius Caesar, Columbus, and Cortez had all stayed at home, and no one had taken their places, world history would have been different. But this is a peculiar theory of history, to say the least.

The irrationality of this passage reveals Mary Shelley's obsessive association of disruption of the family and political activity. The speech might be translated, in a crude and vulgar way, into a message to Shelley something like, "It is people like you and Rousseau who think they are going to do so much good and neglect their families for their big plans, who really mess things up politically." The implication of Frankenstein's speech is not just that men sacrifice their families for the sake of larger goals, but that by neglecting their families men actually cause political disasters. At the end of the book, Walton, another isolated and utopian scientist, follows the advice of the repentant Frankenstein, gives up his quest for knowledge, and returns home to his sister. Mary does not simply suggest that masculine wisdom must be joined with feminine love; she makes the pursuit of knowledge and faithfulness to the family mutually exclusive activities. And there is hell to pay, in Frankenstein, for the man who does not put his family first. His thoughts, scientific and political, become a monster which destroys his family and himself.

Syracuse University
Syracuse, New York