

Part II

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Chapter 3

Introduction to Shelley

(page numbers to Modern Library edition in parentheses and to Bantam edition in square brackets)

As an introduction, let see how Mary Shelley came to give birth to her “hideous progeniture”.

3.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: Biography of Mary Shelley, Introductions of the editor and of the author
- Study questions:
 1. What is Mary Shelley’s familial background?
 2. In which circumstances did Mary Shelley write her novel?
 3. What is Romanticism?
 4. What is Gothicism?

3.2 Life

3.2.1 Family

- Perhaps you recognize the last name: Percy Bysshe Shelley, her husband

- Her maiden name was Mary Godwin
 - daughter of William Godwin
 - named after her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft

3.2.2 William Godwin

- novelist and political philosopher concerned with property, democracy
- believed that human beings are naturally good but have been corrupted by society, like Rousseau
- advocated a kind of utopian communism

3.2.3 Mary Wollstonecraft

- early feminist, concerned with freedom and education of women, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*
- she and William Godwin were opposed to marriage as a form of slavery
 - however, they made an exception and married for the sake of their soon-to-be-born daughter
 - Mary Wollstonecraft already had a daughter born out of wedlock, Fanny Imlay
- Mary Wollstonecraft died from childbed fever after giving birth to Mary

3.2.4 Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

- One of the most important of the romantic and lyric poets (became the idol of the next two or three generations of poets)
- Long visionary poems including *Alastor*, *Adonais*, *Prometheus Unbound* etc.
- Rebellion and agitated life :
 - 1811: expulsion from Oxford for the publication of *The Necessity of Atheism*
 - Running away with Harriet, then with Mary

- Travel across Europe
- drowned in mysterious circumstances (possibly killed for political reasons)

3.2.5 Mary's Education

William Godwin remarried, raising their daughter Mary along with Fanny Imlay and the children of his new wife, incl. Claire Clairmont

- Mary was educated mostly at home
- through her father, met many famous writers, incl. Charles Lamb, Samuel T. Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)
- exposed to radical ideas of her parents and the romantic poets
 - reflected in Mary Shelley's novel: Frankenstein's monster is good until he is corrupted by society
 - also, the idea of free love

3.2.6 Mary's love with Shelley

At 17, runs off with Percy Bysshe Shelley, who abandoned his first wife

- defending their actions according to the principles of free love
- father at first disowned her
- Shelley encouraged her to write

3.3 Background of *Frankenstein*: Romanticism

3.3.1 Romanticism: a little history

England, 18th century

- Lakists (William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge)

- Gothics (see below)

Germany, Goethe (1749-1832)

- Goethe established his literary reputation with *Sorrows of Werther* (1774)
 - a. a semi-autobiographical, highly sentimental story of love and suicide
 - b. another one of the books that Frankenstein's monster reads (167) [112]
- *Sorrows of Werther* launched German and thus European romanticism
- The *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress) movement, a precursor of Romanticism
 - a. *Sturm und Drang* sets out by defying rules and conventions of German poetry, which at that time was pastoral, Anacreontic (praising love and wine)
 - b. part I of Goethe's *Faust* and an unfinished *Prometheus* also belong to this *Sturm und Drang* period
- Note also that *Faust* reflects Goethe's boyhood interest in alchemy, astrology, and occult philosophy: an interest reflected in his later works
 - a. an interest we also find in Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, who reads Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus
 - b. Goethe's early life has other parallels with Victor Frankenstein's: the provincial upbringing followed by the loss of innocence at the university

Over all Europe in the 19th century

- Followers in Germany are Novalis, E.T.A. Hoffman, Höderlin etc
- In England, late and last romantics: William Blake, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, John Keats. Yeats is often referred to as the last romantic poet
- In France : Chateaubriand, Hugo, Lamartine, Alfred de Vigny... + Influence of Jean Jacques Rousseau
- In Italy : Risorgimento, Manzoni

Also romantic music !

3.3.2 Romantic aesthetics

- Against the Enlightenment
 - a. emphasizes imagination, feelings and passions seen as superior to reason
 - b. intuition vs. deduction
 - c. individualism vs. universality
- Against Classicism
 - a. Importance of the self – expression of personal exalted feelings (against realism)
 - b. Wonders of Nature, as mirroring human passions
 - c. Ordinary Language (Hugo *Hernani*)
 - d. Art should be judged independently of moral or social norms. Art for itself.
- The isolated genius is a creator, thence sets up himself against the Creator, and thus makes himself a tragic figure. A theory expressed by Samuel T. Coleridge, represented in his dreamlike, hallucinatory poems like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*
 - a. *Ancient Mariner* – a poem of magic and mystery, in which the protagonist is punished for killing an albatross that arrives at a ship in the far north as an omen of good luck
 - b. see allusion to the albatross on p. 14 [7] and again on 202 [137]

3.3.3 Romanticism and Political Rebellion

Prometheus

- Mary Shelley sub-titled her work "The Modern Prometheus"
- Prometheus is usually seen as the patron of human civilization. There are lots of versions of this legend (Hesiod, Plato etc.), which however typically include:
 - a. Prometheus is a Titan (Titans are deities known to have lead war against the dominant gods, prominently Zeus)

- b. Creator of men out of clay – but men are deprived of defenses
 - b. Stealing fire for man from the gods of Olympus
 - c. Defender of humankind against Zeus, who wants to destroy them
 - d. Attached to the mount Caucasus, where an eagle would come every day and eat his liver
 - e. delivered by Heracles (Hercule)
- In *Frankenstein*, the monster turns against his creator much as Prometheus turns against his god
 - Her interest in Prometheus reflects her link with the romantics

The romantics emulated tragedies like Prometheus, in which the hero sets himself up against the gods. In general, **romanticism is bounded to the rejection of the values of the aristocratic social and political norms of the "Ancient régime"** (absolutism). It developed while Europe experienced the several revolutions of the 19th century (e.g. in France: 1830, 1848, 1870) after the French Revolution (1789). Thus, romantic values typically include:

- Rejection of authority and of absolutism
- Rejection of social norms: protagonist of romantic literature typically at odds with society, both rejecting and rejected by it ("poetes maudits") - Isolation of the misunderstood genius, at odds with the narrow-minded "bourgeois"
 - a. like Shelley and Byron
 - b. and, in the novel, much like Frankenstein and his monster
- In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, it is Satan that Percy Shelley most admired – Rebellion against the creator
 - a. one of the books that the monster reads (167) [112]
 - b. note how the monster always addresses Victor Frankenstein in Biblical language

3.3.4 Rousseau

Rousseau is one of the most influential philosophers during the romantic period. He is also of great influence on the ideas that were defended during the many revolutions that take place at that time.

Rousseau becomes famous in winning the price for the best essay in a contest organized by the Dijon academy. The topic was: "Has the restoration of the sciences and arts tended to purify morals". Rousseau defends a controversial negative answer in his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*. Rousseau claims, against the philosophers of the Enlightenment, that progress in sciences and arts indeed perverts people.

Even if it did not win the price of the Dijon academy, Rousseau's second discourse, the *Discourse on inequality*, is more representative of Rousseau's ideas which were both the most important to him and the most influential until today.

The main idea is that society is not essential to human being. To uncover the true nature of the human being, one has to peel off the different layers of accidental qualities that humans brought with socialization. To try to find out the true nature of humans by considering the state of nature is not a new method in philosophy at that time. It is common to Hobbes (*Leviathan*) and Locke (*Second Treatise on government*). Note that none of these authors understood the state of nature as a state that actually occurred in history. All these authors consider the analysis of the state of nature as a philosophical exercise. That said, these authors diverge considerably on what the true nature of man is.

According to Rousseau, men are naturally good, but perverted by socialization. It is radically at odds with Hobbes's claim that, in a state of nature, men are permanently in a state of war with another. Rousseau claims that Hobbes's characterization of men by their seeking self-preservation is not sufficient. Men are also essentially characterized by their *pity*. In a state of nature, men are isolated from one another, peaceful and happy with what they have. Society brings, in particular with the invention of property, competition, inequality and egoistic mentality.

Note that the second *Discourse* includes a dedication to the republic of Geneva.

Another very famous and most influential work by Rousseau is the *Social Contract*. It is an attempt to find a form of society that could protect the natural equality and natural goodness of men. The most famous quote is:

"Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains". This is saying that the actual social contracts are specious. Rousseau tries to find a way out of these specious contract, toward the ideal social and political state. The *Social Contract* was of great influence on the leaders of the French Revolution (1789).

Finally, *Emile* is a treatise on education, where Rousseau's idea are applied to the education of a young boy. Just as the *Social Contract* was an attempt to find a form of socialization which does not bring inequality and hostility between men, *Emile* is an attempt to find a form of education that preserves the natural goodness and natural morality of the being who is to live in the society of other men. The main idea is that a good education ensures that the natural character of the pupil be developed so that his natural morality is preserved¹.

3.4 Occasion of *Frankenstein*: Gothicism

In 1816, the Shelleys, Lord Byron, and Claire Clairmont, and Polidori were neighbors near Lake Geneva in Switzerland

- They spent their evenings reading ghost stories or gothic novels.
 - Gothicism (1764-1840 roughly) is a literary genre that belongs to Romanticism. It follows the Gothic Revival in architecture in England (The original Gothic movement in architecture goes back to the 12. century).
 - had peaked in popularity by this time – major contributors:
 - Horace Walpole,
 - William Thomas Beckford,
 - Ann Radcliffe,
 - Matthew Gregory Lewis, *The Monk*(1796).
 - A satire: *Northanger Abbey* (1818) by Jane Austen
 - typically set in castles, dungeons, monasteries, etc. – Gothic architecture And medieval nostalgia

¹That said, Rousseau abandoned as orphans all his five children...

- with ghosts and apparitions or curse of all sorts
- exploring the darker side of life – death and madness – against rationalism
- melodrama, (self-)parody – art as pleasurable, against classicism
- Anti-catholicism (excess of Inquisition)
- One night they decided on a contest to write ghost stories
 - a. Polidori's story was about a human vampire, a story that later served as the basis for Bram Stoker's *Dracula*
 - b. Mary was having trouble thinking up a story until one night, when they had been talking about things like the principle of life and whether it could be discovered or transferred
 - they had discussed Erasmus Darwin's experiments with spontaneous generation (vermicelli) – alluded to in Percy Shelley's preface (xxxiii) [xxvii]
 - speculated whether one could bring a corpse to life with galvanism (electricity)
 - this discussion led to nightmares, the basis of her story

Frankenstein is both like and unlike the gothic novels they had been reading

- monster is not a creature of the mind or an hallucination: material being created by science
- created in an attic not in a dungeon: perversion of intellect, not of passions (63) [39]
- origin of our mad scientist stories
- first science-fiction novel

3.4.1 Summing up: Frankenstein's background

We should then keep in mind, in reading and analyzing *Frankenstein*, the following three elements of cultural and political background:

- Gothicism in literature,
- Romantic revolutionary ideas in aesthetics,
- Romantic revolutionary ideas in politics.

One of our aim is to locate Mary Shelley's novel within this framework. It will not be as easy as it might seem. Her position about this different movements is often mixed: even if she is influenced by these ideas, she always departs from the usual framework (Gothic or Romantic). An usual characterization of *Frankenstein*, is that it is a romantic reaction against dehumanizing science. This is a bit of an over-simplification. *Frankenstein* arguably is an attack on what's dehumanizing, but Shelley's target is much larger than science.

3.5 Shelley's Frankenstein: a "treatise on the ethics of aesthetic creativity"?

This is how Wendy Steiner (Introduction to the edition we read) characterizes the message conveyed by Shelley in *Frankenstein*.

To understand this, we have to know something about ideas of aesthetics in Shelley's period. As Steiner explains, it is a reaction to the aesthetics of the sublime of **Burke, Kant**

- these writers contrasted **the sublime with the beautiful** in the following way:
 - the **beautiful** is small, smooth, polished, delicate, light, causing pleasure, usually of a sexual nature, as in the pleasure of seeing a beautiful woman
 - the **sublime** is huge, rough, rugged, solid, massive, powerful, dark, gloomy, dangerous, causing pain, as illustrated in the novel in the experience of mountains and polar ice
- the experience of the **sublime** was supposed to be the **higher aesthetic experience**
 - as the sublime is connected with more powerful emotions than sensory pleasure

3.5. *SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN: A "TREATISE ON THE ETHICS OF AESTHETIC CREATIVITY"*

- we are elevated when being removed to a safe distance from that which is sublime

- **Mary Wollstonecraft** had earlier attacked Burke on his account of the beautiful and the sublime

- not only sexist, relegating women to an inferior position

- but dehumanizes men, as well

- ***Frankenstein* can be read as an attack on an aesthetics that emphasizes the sublime over the beautiful as dehumanizing us**

- Frankenstein's monster is sublime

- Mary Shelley seems to favor the "merely" beautiful over the sublime

- see p. xviii, where Wendy Steiner quotes a passage in which Victor learns to come to appreciate the natural beauty of the Rhine river, over the sublimity of the Alps [141]

Thus, Shelley is buying many of the romantic ideas, but also rejects some of the romantic rules in aesthetics. She probably defends the beautiful over the sublime.

