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Frankenstein in the Context of German Romanticism

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Frankenstein in the Context of German "Nature Philosophy"

(I'd like to dedicate this lecture to my son Nate, who is 23 years old today)

In her introduction to the third edition, Mary Shelley describes the origin of her famous novel:

In the summer of 1816, we visited Switzerland, and became the neighbours of Lord Byron. . . .

But it proved a wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house. Some volumes of ghost stories, translated from the German into French, fell into our hands.

. . .

"We will each write a ghost story," said Lord Byron; and his proposition was acceded to. There were four of us. . . . [Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Polidori]

Every thing must have a beginning . . . and that beginning must be linked to something that went before. The Hindoos give the world an elephant to support it, but they make the elephant stand upon a tortoise. Invention it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. . . . Invention consists in the capacity of seizing on the capabilities of a subject, and in the power of moulding and fashioning ideas suggested to it.

Little did Mary Shelley know that one of the tortoises her work of fiction stood upon was the volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in what is today Indonesia. During ten days in April of the previous year, the volcano spewed over a million and a half tons of dust into the upper atmosphere. The spring and summer of the next year were disastrous for New Englanders who lost their crops to a hard frost in May and two large snowstorms in June. [Joseph and Lucy Smith had their farming difficulties compounded by this freak of nature, and they moved from New England with thousands of other who lost their farms.] In Europe, the volcanic dust exacerbated food shortages in England and France. Switzerland declared a national emergency because of the famine. And, Mary Shelley tells us, the wet ungenial summer led her and her companions to read German ghost stories and to try a hand at the genre themselves. Hers, of course, was the only one of the four to create much of a ripple.

With what became her novel *Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus*, published two years after it was begun that wet summer, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley created a doctor (and his monster) whose name has become shorthand for science that overreaches itself. [The Yale historian Susan Lederer, curator of the Smithsonian exhibit that brings us together here, demonstrated this at length a couple of weeks ago for the UVSC History Lecture Series.]

For the next few minutes, I will focus on another of the tortoises Shelley stood on while writing her novel, or perhaps one might better describe it as another tortoise standing next to the tortoise her elephant stood upon – namely, German Romanticism. The influences are both direct and indirect and they represent a Zeitgeist out of which a book about creating life out of inanimate materials could be expected to grow.

Percy Shelley's preface to his wife's novel begins with a statement that "The event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed by Dr. [Erasmus, grandfather of Charles] Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany [Blumenbach, Rudolphi, and Tiedemann, according to Paul Hunger in the Norton critical edition], as not of impossible occurrence." The gesture to German thinkers reminds us that the Victor Frankenstein studies natural philosophy in Ingolstadt, Germany, and that the first book the monster reads is Goethe's novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

It also makes me wonder what Mary and Percy Shelley were reading in the years between 1814 and 1818. Shelley biographers have combed her journals and come up with this 41-page list. [I imagine there are some of us here who didn't read 41 books over the last five years, much less 41 pages of books.] I'll skip over the English texts by William Godwin, Mary's father, and Mary Wollstonecraft, her mother, and all the books by Shakespeare and Milton and Percy Shelley and Byron and Coleridge and Voltaire and all the authors of Gothic novels (she read a bunch of these!) to get to the German writers she read, some in German, some in English translation. There was Lessing's play *Emelia Galotti*, several novels by Christoph Wieland, Goethe's *Werther*, Schiller's play *Don Carlos* and his potboiler novel *The Ghost Seer*, Christian Vulpius's highway-robber novel *Rinaldo Rinaldini* (after Vulpius's sister Christiane approached Goethe for help for her brother she and Goethe became lovers), several Romantic novels by August Lafontaine, and works by Kotzebue, Weber, Bürger, Moritz, and Naubert.

These names indicate that there was an active exchange of ideas across Europe (German Romantics, for instance, translated Shakespeare and adopted his use of blank verse) and that Mary and Percy Shelley must

have had some amazing conversations about ideas coming out of Germany.

Some of the most influential of these ideas belonged to an idealist philosopher named Schelling (roommate of Hegel and Hölderlin at the University of Tübingen and colleague of the older Fichte at the University of Jena). Coleridge, whose "Ancient Mariner" is quoted in *Frankenstein*, was heavily indebted to Schelling's aesthetic philosophy. Schelling was friends with Tieck, Novalis, August and Friedrich Schlegel [August's wife Caroline divorced him and married Schelling], all of the Jena circle of Romantics.

He worked the productive boundary between philosophy and science as editor of the *Journal for Speculative Physics* and of the *Journal for Medicine as Science*. His famous epigraph "Nature is visible Spirit; Spirit is invisible Nature," succinctly states the German Romantics' ongoing search for connections between animate and inanimate worlds. According to Schelling, the fundamental aim of the sciences was the interpretation of nature as a unity . . . mechanical, chemical, electrical, and vital forces were all manifestations of the same underlying force.

Benjamin Franklin research into atmospheric electricity and Luigi Galvani's work with electricity and frog legs electrified the imaginations of German writers thinking about the unity of nature. Novalis's novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, for example, has a fairy tale at its core in which the characters Fabel, Zinc, Gold, and Tourmaline find the giant Atlas who has been paralyzed.

Gold placed a coin in his mouth, and Zink slid a basin under his loins. Fabel touched his eyes and emptied a vessel over his brow.

As soon as the water ran over his eyes into his mouth and down into the basin, a flash of life quivered in all his muscles. With this same galvanic battery the three bring the Father to life and then jolt a frozen nature into spring.

Many other Romantic authors explore the line between the animate and inanimate, including E.T.A. Hoffmann, whose story "The Sandman," about a doll that is brought to life, lives on in opera "The Tales of Hoffmann" and dance "Copellia."

But I'd like now to talk about Frankenstein in the context of the work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose version of *Faust*, like *Frankenstein* a piece of literature about science and its consequences, is the other major myth to emerge from the turn of the eighteenth century.

Inspired by a lightening strike, Victor Frankenstein follows his curiosity into a library. He reads first the alchemical magic of Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magnus (all Germans) and then turns to the modern chemistry and natural philosophy taught at the University of Ingolstadt, north of Munich. His teacher there tells him that

The ancient teachers of this science promised impossibilities, and performed nothing. The modern masters promise very little; they know that metals cannot be transmuted, and that the elixir of life is a chimera. But these philosophers, whose hands seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pour over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places.

Faust too wants to penetrate into the recesses nature, or in his words as he sits at his desk:

Look at me. I've worked right through philosophy, right through medicine and jurisprudence, as they call it, and that wretched theology too. Toiled and slaved at it and know no more than when I began. I have my master's degree and my doctor's and it must be ten years now that I've led my students by the nose this way and that, upstairs and downstairs, and all the time I see plainly that we don't and can't know anything. It eats me up. Of course I'm ahead of these silly scholars, these doctors and clerics and what not. I have no doubts or scruples to bother me, and I snap my fingers at hell and the devil. But I pay the price. I've lost all joy in life. I don't delude myself. I shall never know anything worth knowing, never have a word to say that might be useful to my fellow men. I own nothing, no money, no property, I have no standing in the world. It's a dog's life and worse. And this is why I've gone over to magic, to see if I can get secrets out of the spirit world and not have to go on sweating and saying things I don't know, discover, it may be, what it is that holds the world together, behold with my own eyes its innermost workings, and stop all this fooling with words.

That turn from the best science of the time to magic is the opposite of Frankenstein's turn; but it shares the desire for a kind of unifying knowledge beyond what is known.

Faust, part one of which was published in 1808, is called a tragedy. Faust's incessant striving for knowledge causes the death of more than

one people, most notably Gretchen. But from the beginning that is seen as necessary and good. This is set out in the Prologue in Heaven (Translated by Barker Fairly)

The Lord

Do you know Faust?

Mephistopheles

What? The professor?

The Lord

He is my servant.

Meph

Well, I must say, he has his own way of serving you. The common food and drink is not for him. There's an unrest in him that drives him off the map. He half knows how crazy he is. He claims that heaven ought to yield him the pick of the stars and earth its uttermost delights. And nothing, near or remote, can ever satisfy him.

The Lord

I admit he's not yet rid of his confusion, but I shall soon lead him into the light. . . .

Meph

What will you wager? I'll take him from you yet, if you give me permission to lead him gently my way.

The Lord

You're free to do that for the rest of his days. Striving and straying, you can't have the one without the other. . . . Draw his mind away from its true source and, if you can get a grip on him, set him on your downward path. And confess in the end to your shame: man in his dark impulse

always knows the right road from the wrong. . . . I give you complete freedom, as I always have. I've never hated your sort. Of all the negative spirits your roguish kind gives me the least concern. It's so easy for men to slump and before long they want to do nothing at all. So I don't object to their having your company. You act as a stimulant and so serve a positive purpose in spite of yourself.

When Mephistopheles and Faust finally make their wager, with Mephistopheles promising to serve Faust until he is finally satisfied, it is couched in these words:

Faust

If ever I lie down in idleness and contentment, let that be the end of me, let that be final. If you can delude me into feeling pleased with myself, if your good things ever get the better of me, than may that day be my last day. This is my wager.

Meph

Agreed.

Faust

And shake again. If ever the passing moment is such that I wish it not to pass and I say to it 'You are beautiful, stay a while,' then let that be the finish. The clock can stop. You can put me in chains and ring the death-bell. I shall welcome it and you will be quit of your service.

This is, of course, very different from the lesson Victor Frankenstein passes on to Walton with his last words:

I dare not ask you to do what I think right, for I may still be misled by passion. . . . The forms of the beloved dead flit before me, and I hasten to their arms. Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries.

Frankenstein is called "the modern Prometheus" in the subtitle of the novel, and the consequences of stealing fire from the gods are terrible. Goethe's poem "Prometheus" (1773) – Werther published in 1774, has quite a different message:

Cover your heaven, Zeus,
With cloudy vapours
And like a boy
Beheading thistles
Practise on oaks and mountain peaks –
Still you must leave
My earth intact
And my small hovel, which you did not build,
And this my hearth
Whose glowing beat
You envy me.

I know of nothing more wretched

Under the sun than you gods!
Meagrely you nourish
Your majesty
On dues of sacrifice
And breath of prayer
And would suffer want
But for children and beggars,
Poor hopeful fools.

Once too, a child,
Not knowing where to turn,
I raised bewildered eyes
Up to the sun, as if above there were
An ear to hear my complaint,
A heart like mine
To take pity on the oppressed.

Who helped me
Against the Titans' arrogance?
Who rescued me from death,
From slavery?
Did not my holy and glowing heart,
Unaided, accomplish all?
And did it not, young and good,
Cheated, glow thankfulness
For its safety to him, to the sleeper above?

I pay homage to you? For what?
Have you ever relieved
The burdened man's anguish?
Have you ever assuaged
The frightened man's tears?
Was it not omnipotent Time
That forged me into manhood,
And eternal Fate,
My masters and yours?

Or did you think perhaps
That I should hate this life,
Flee into deserts
Because not all
The blossoms of dream grew ripe?

Here I sit, forming men
In my image,
A race to resemble me:
To suffer, to weep,
To enjoy, to be glad –
And never to heed you, Like me!

(translation Michael Hamburger)

Goethe celebrates the hero who steals fire from the gods. Mary Shelley calls that hubris into question

Mary Shelly focuses on the consequences of science that doesn't care for its creation. Goethe sets aside the consequences because striving is the highest good. When we read *Faust* today, conditioned in part by Mary Shelley, it's hard to suppose that anything Faust experiences is worth the violence to Gretchen or the deaths of the old couple Baucis and Philomon at the play's end. And conversely, reading *Frankenstein* after the lessons of *Faust*, it's hard to understand why Victor Frankenstein reacts so negatively to his creation:

Oh! No mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endowed with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived.

Compare that response to this passage from the second part of *Faust* in which Faust's assistant Wagner has created life in a test tube:

The glass is ringing with amorous force. It fogs and then clears. It must be coming. I can see a neat little manikin gesturing. What do you want/ What more would you have? The secret's out now. Just listen to the sound. It's turning into a voice, it's speaking.

Homunculus, addressing Wagner from the bottle: Well father, how are you? That was no joke. Come, give me a hug, but gently, gently, or you'll break the glass.

Later Thales and Proteus talk about the little man in endearing terms:

Proteus, astonished: An incandescent little dwarf. I never saw one before.

Thales: He wants advice about how to get born. The way I have it from him, he came into the world only half-born. It's strange. He has plenty of mental attributes, but he's very short on body. So far the bottle is all the weight he has. He longs to be embodied properly.

Proteus: A real virgin birth. You're there before you ought to be.

Thales: And there's another difficulty. If I'm not mistaken, he's a hermaphrodite.

Proteus: Then all the better. Wherever he lands, he'll fit in.

Because of the horror he experiences, Frankenstein abandons his creation. What his abandonment says about him makes Shelley's novel more than a warning to science. The creature undergoes a rather sweet and subtle socialization as he watches a family through a hole in their wall. He is fully and delicately human until he is beaten and shot and chased out because of how he looks. While we remember the novel as a story about misbegotten creation, it is also a story about the consequences of persecuting the other.

The fascination Shelley and Goethe share for what science might bring, for the connection between the animate and the inanimate, for nature

as an organic whole, is tempered by human connections and relationships in all their complexities.