

## “A blot upon the earth”: Nature’s “Negative” and the Production of Monstrosity in *Frankenstein*

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### Abstract

*Despite the lure of Alpine landscapes, Frankenstein hasn't been taken up at length by many ecocritics. This article will examine monstrosity and acculturation in the context of Western culture's objectification of nonhuman nature, circling back to bodies of water and the extraordinary environmental conditions of the novel's production. Alongside explicit references to and representations of the natural world, human responses to nonhuman nature are often negatively inscribed, inversely articulated or unconscious, in culture. Reading dialectically foregrounds both types of inscription. A dialectical ecocriticism, what I am calling ecocultural materialism or an ecocultural approach, as a critical position and methodology, suggests that nonhuman nature not only encompasses and impacts human cultures, in ways that we can and cannot see, but that it also might serve as an intervention in human cultures, in ways that we both can and cannot understand.*

### Introduction

*Frankenstein* moves like an iceberg in chill waters. Structurally, the narrative is surrounded by the Arctic Ocean and, within each concentric narration, a body of water serves as the background for the novel's most dramatic action: Lake Lemman, the North Sea, or the Arctic. *Frankenstein* embeds human activity in, quite literally, a sea of connections. Bodies of water seem present in opposition to other bodies: mountains, islands, and human beings or, more accurately, humanity and its habitat, dry land. Here expanses of water function as sublime landscapes in their own right, as unfathomable immensities or impenetrable depths. And, like typically sublime topography, these large bodies of water have peaks and valleys, jagged edges and roaring sounds; they are uncontrollable and overwhelming.

Despite the lure of such landscapes, *Frankenstein* hasn't been taken up at length by many ecocritics. Jonathan Bate's brief analysis in *The Song of the Earth* remains one of a handful of

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ecocritical commentaries on the novel. Ecocriticism, as a self-conscious critical practice, gained legitimacy quickly in Romantic studies because many of its critical concerns were already a part of the field. Questions about the relationship between human beings and the rest of nature, knowledge and power, and the various effects of the Industrial Revolution are central to Romantic writing and scholars of Romanticism. *Frankenstein*, perhaps more than any other Romantic text, explicitly asks such questions, challenging readers to engage layers of ambivalent theorizing of dialectical relations (between characters, ideas, texts, and so on). As the critical discourse on and around *Frankenstein* continues to reach staggering proportions (much of it written in the last fifteen years), the novel's ambivalence seems even more pronounced; the critical body magnifies fissures in textual meaning, leaving a labyrinth of relations.

Though there is a shortage of ecocritical readings of *Frankenstein*, there are a number of Marxist analyses of the novel. A "standard" Marxist reading, if it examined the recurrence of bodies of water, for example, would likely read the trope as part of a structured retreat from the problems of modernity. Herein lies the need for an ecocritical reading of the novel: Marxist readings, while absolutely indispensable, tend to view the representation of nature in the novel as simply "part of the problem," repressing the modern,<sup>1</sup> or as padding, filler from the Shelley's "tourist diary," *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*.<sup>2</sup> Most do not see the way in which representations of nature connect to the core contradictions of the novel (such as its representation or lack of representation of class politics) and the way in which these representations are themselves inherently political.<sup>3</sup>

There is, however, an important connection between these *natural* bodies of water and the *produced* body of the monster. Victor's drive to transcend human nature and culture, to transcend the limitations of the human body and human knowledge, is akin to Robert Walton's drive to transverse the Arctic Ocean. In both cases, materiality becomes an obstacle to overcome, rather than the fabric of existence. The constant narrative proximity to and within bodies of water, and its parallel in the body of the monster, serves to remind us of *our* bodies, and the human place in the material weight of the world. It is far from a coincidence that Freud terms the unbounded sense of connection to the universe the "oceanic feeling." It is, in fact, a manifestation of an immanent sensibility, of our sense of the interconnectedness of the world. This sense is reified in Western, capitalist culture; our connection to the immanent world is transformed into its opposite, into a drive for transcendence – a drive to transcend the world of "objects" and the evidence of our belonging to it, the body.<sup>4</sup>

Expanses of water embody the immense and active more-than-human world surrounding the plot of the novel and surfacing in the character of the monster, and monstrosity itself as the subject of this critique. In this article as in the novel, bodies of water encompass an examination of interconnected ideas and concerns, including origins and monstrosity, education and intertextuality, culture and the Bildungsroman. From the incredible size and strength of the monster, to the significance of his articulations and Victor's irrational response to his gaze, *Frankenstein* registers culture's terror of nonhuman agency as, in part, a fear of objectification. When the monster speaks, culture speaks both through and against him; the oceanic feeling becomes the production of monstrosity. This article will examine monstrosity and acculturation in the context of Western culture's objectification of nonhuman nature, circling back to bodies of water and the extraordinary environmental conditions of the novel's production.

Alongside explicit references to and representations of the natural world, human responses to nonhuman nature are often negatively inscribed, inversely articulated or unconscious, in culture.<sup>5</sup> Reading dialectically foregrounds both types of inscription. A dialectical ecocriticism, what I am calling ecocultural materialism or an ecocultural approach, as a critical position and methodology, suggests that nonhuman nature not only encompasses and impacts human cultures, in ways that we can and cannot see, but that it also might serve as an intervention in human cultures, in ways that we both can and cannot understand.

There is much negatively inscribed in *Frankenstein*, what the text means but does not say. Conversely, the monstrous is that which speaks but isn't allowed to "mean;" monstrosity itself is constituted by meaningful acts of anything, anyone *not human*. The monster, the Other in (and of) Western culture, both figures and displaces the existence of this worldly nonhuman agency, relegating it to the shadows of the fantastic. While the monster signifies many things, including the unrecognizable itself, he is also an imprint of a human fear of nonhuman agency.

There has been some critical dispute about what to call the monster. In *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate refers to this character, the third narrator, as "Creature" (and only creature) instead of "monster" or any of the other names for him which appear in the text. To refer to the monster as "Creature" alone flattens the complexity of both the character and the philosophical problems he embodies. As Warren Montag suggests, "the monster is a product rather than a creation, assembled and joined together not so much by a man ...as by science, technology, and industry ...whose overarching logic subsumes and subjects even the greatest of geniuses" (388). In an attempt to respect the monster's agency (or perhaps to give him more agency), Bate calls him Creature; oddly, however, it has the reverse effect, ignoring the radical potential of the monster and text. As Michie demonstrates, the novel consistently and symbolically replaces narratives of creation with narratives of production, even intertextually, as in the replacement of *Paradise Lost* with Victor's laboratory journal (97). These movements between creation and production enacted by the multiple "names" culture uses to classify the monster bears upon the explicitly dialectical relationship in the text, that of master and slave. Effacing the dictates of the former (the master's classifications) erases the latter, removing the revolutionary potential of the slave and of monstrosity generally.

As the Bildungsroman of Frankenstein's monster (and of Frankenstein himself) the novel suggests something about our relationship to our own biological origins and the origin of culture itself as a response to nonhuman nature. The monster's narrative, embedded within Victor's story told to Robert, details his birth to sensation, thought, and reason. As he watches the De Lacey family in their cottage from the hole in the wall of his adjacent refuge, the monster learns about human beings and human culture through observation and second-hand lessons, such as Felix's tutelage of Safie. In a remarkably short period of time, the monster leaps from the realization that the sounds he hears have meanings to the association of words with objects:

I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. ...This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it. But I was baffled in every attempt I made for this purpose. ...By great application, however, and after having remained during the space of several revolutions of the moon in my hovel, I discovered the names that were given to some of the most familiar objects of discourse: I learned and applied

the words fire, milk, bread, and wood. I also learned the names of the cottagers themselves. (88-89)

Within another few months, the monster has already grasped the highly abstract concept of signs, the process of reading and writing:

This reading had puzzled me at first; but, by degrees, I discovered that he [Felix] uttered many of the same sounds when he read as when he talked. I conjectured, therefore, that he found signs on the paper for speech which he understood, and I ardently longed to comprehend these also; but how was that possible, when I did not even understand the sounds for which they stood as signs? (90)

The monster's narrative of his development does not make any attempt to answer this question; he does not know how it was possible for him to grasp such concepts so quickly and before he was able to grasp the complexities of language itself. His next sentence is: "I improved, however, sensibly in this science, but not sufficiently to follow up any kind of conversation ..." (90).

The monster then masters language itself within a matter of a few more months. As Nancy Yousef notes in "The Monster in a Dark Room: *Frankenstein*, Feminism, and Philosophy," his development is in most respects no less fantastic than his non-birth (198). Yousef situates the impossibility of the monster's development in the context of a sustained, multi-generational feminist engagement with empiricist thinkers such as Locke and Rousseau; the monster's radical autonomy from the dependency of infancy and the normal childhood network of relationship (which, she argues, serves to critique and enlarge the tradition of empiricism) makes him monstrous (220-226).

To examine the monster's radical autonomy (and radical potential), we must return to his acquisition of language. The monster's speech, his narration to Victor (reported by Victor to Robert, narrated by Robert in a letter to his sister Margaret [Walton] Saville), is the structural center of the novel, and his acquisition of language perhaps the most improbable part of his impossible existence. His voice is the voice of question, the voice of the child discovering the world and its misery as his own. Upon learning of the nature of the human social world from Felix's recitations to Safie from Volney's *Ruins of Empires*, the monster begins to examine his own nature:

The words induced me to turn towards myself. I learned that the possessions most esteemed by your fellow-creatures were, high and unsullied descent united with riches. A man might be respected with only one of these acquisitions; but without either he was considered, except in very rare instances, as a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profit of the chosen few. *And what was I?* Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endowed with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even the same nature as man. ...When I looked around I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned? (96, *emphasis mine*)

Moments later, the monster self-consciously repeats his question, "*What was I?*" The question again recurred, to be answered only with groans" (97, *emphasis mine*). Even before he learns of his fantastic creation at the hands of Victor, the monster is convinced that he is wholly different from human beings, "a blot upon the earth." Only after he learns of the hierarchical organization of Western culture does he ask, "What was I?" Grammatically, it positions the monster as an object, making him oddly nonexistent (or nonperson) in the moment of the question's asking.

The monster asks his terrified question, which seems to position him *to himself* as a monster (conflating nonhuman, nonperson, and object), not when he discovered the horror of *how* he was made in Victor's laboratory, but when he discovers *from what* and *into what* he has been made: the past and present of Western culture. Read positively, the horror that the monster expresses is a horror of culture; Western culture, and not the monster, is in fact the subject/object of the monster's query. Read negatively, this question becomes the sound of the subject, of Western culture itself in the figure of the monster, asking monstrosity, "What are you?" Displaced grammatically as object, as the referent of "what" rather than who, the voice of Western culture asks, through its own subject/product, the nature of its "opposite." The monster is, in this sense, the ultimate Other, that which literally figures Western culture's horror of nonhuman agency. While the content of the question seems designed to deny the agency of the nonhuman, as a question it formally acknowledges the agency (the subjectivity) of nonhuman others. It is a question to which Western and possibly all of human culture both fears and expects a reply. It is the question of the little boy who asks quietly, in the dark, "Is there anyone under my bed?"

Language, defined as a system of communication that signifies abstract concepts as well as concrete referents, is supposedly that which separates human beings from other creatures and, correspondingly, culture from nature. Language represents the difference between human and nonhuman as the difference between agency and nonagency. In "Teaching the Monster to Read: Mary Shelley, Education and *Frankenstein*," Anne McWhir notes that the Eighteenth Century contained many beings whose status as human was controversial, including wild men, idiots, women, non-Western peoples, and orangutans: "According to James Burnet, Lord Monboddo (1.187-88), [orangutans] were in fact members of the human species. Monboddo argues this on the basis of their educability and their presumed capacity for speech" (80).<sup>6</sup> Western culture's narrowly defined notion of language serves as the benchmark for subjectivity ordinarily to exclude, rather include, other living beings in the realm of meaningful consciousness and therefore agency and rights. Certainly the monster's very narrative challenges the notion that language, and therefore culture, is the sole territory of human beings; he and others repeatedly emphasize both his difference from human beings and his remarkable powers of articulate reasoning. To share our identity as culture-makers with other beings means, terrifyingly, that we share their status as part of and subject to nature, "red in tooth and claw" or otherwise. The degree to which Mary Shelley's depiction of the monster's process of acquiring language – Rousseau's "supplement" to nature – seems fantastic is the degree to which we fear nonhuman agency.

Explicitly, the monster's ability to narrate makes him monstrous, makes him unnatural. "Negatively," his narrative of coming into Western culture expresses culture's anxiety about its self-proclaimed identity as unique in the world. A little nervously, culture exclaims, "I am alone; everywhere I turn I see that there is nothing else like me in the entire world." In this way, the

monster functions as an expression of our fear of nonhuman agency, whispering against our insistence that we are alone in the world. And yet, the monster's lack of "natural" connections, his manufactured alienation, negatively betrays our recognition, and fear, of similarity. The novel repeatedly compares the monster to other characters, encouraging readers to do the same, to recognize similar needs, desires, and fears. As nearly all critics of the novel note, the monster is, in several respects, Victor's double.

This representation of duality suggests a conscious critique of capitalism as well as an anxiety about identity within capitalism. Margo Perkins's Hegelian reading of the novel, "The Nature of Otherness: Class and Difference in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," focuses on the Master-Servant dialectic between Victor and the monster and its relation to class politics, especially in the representations of the relationships between class and justice, and material reality and ethical values (27). Perkins notes that Victor imposes the moral values of his class onto the monster and that, according to those values, characters' responses to the monster are predetermined; as we see with little William Frankenstein, there can be no innocence within capitalism (39-40). Perkins argues that although Shelley raises issues about class oppression, she doesn't really challenge existing class structure (40). Indeed, as a representation of class relations, the dialectic between Victor and the monster does not seem to allow for the possibility of positive change, for an intervention in the spiraling crisis of capitalism. From this perspective, the novel seems to reify bourgeois anxiety about class oppression, making it another regrettable yet insurmountable "natural" crisis, like a storm above Mont Blanc or turbulence on Lake Lemman. It becomes, as a product of a Victor's "natural" curiosity and human failings, part of the cost of living.

However, as a double (and to some degree parallel) Bildungsroman, *Frankenstein* expresses this anxiety in more fluid terms. Victor's narrative of coming into culture begins with the social context of his birth, the social standing of his family in Geneva, and the history of his parents' meeting and marriage. The first mention of Victor's person is in the context of his education: "[My father] relinquished many of his public employments, and devoted himself exclusively to the education of his children. Of these I was the eldest, and the destined successor to all his labors and utility. No creature could have more tender parents than mine" (19). From this beginning, Victor goes on to describe the introduction of his cousin Elizabeth into his family, his close friend Henry Clerval, his interest in natural philosophy, and the violent thunderstorm that inspired his later experiments. At seventeen, "I became the instructor of my brothers. Ernest was six years younger than myself, and was my principal pupil" (25).

Victor's acculturation is, with the exception of his father's rebuff concerning Cornelius Agrippa, a happy discovery of the world, as student and teacher. It is significant that Ernest (again, the only member of the Frankenstein family to survive the events of the narrative) is Victor's primary pupil, a point I will return to in a moment. By contrast, the monster's narrative begins with pain and uncertainty about the world and his place in it. We are struck by the contrast between one creature's fond description of his tender parents and the other's sense of his parent's horror at the fact of his existence.

As a pedagogical tool, the Bildungsroman often serves as either cautionary or exemplary tale. That both Victor's and the monster's narratives revolve around education seems particularly important. Victor is not only Ernest's instructor, he is also the monster's. Through Victor's journal, the monster learns not only the facts of his birth but also the social context of his

production. While Victor begins his narrative with the knowledge of his birth (natural and social), the monster must discover this information through writing. As Paul Cantor and others argue, the monster's acculturation only furthers his alienation (126), while human solidarity with Victor persists throughout the novel (Yousef 223). In fact, Anne McWhir goes so far as to argue that the monster is an uncritical reader whose encounters with *Paradise Lost* and other texts cause only suffering.

The role of production in acculturation is expressed in the intertextuality of these parallel Bildungsromans. While the positive representation of this produced nature of culture betrays, as indicated earlier, an anxiety about identity within capitalism, the "negative" of this representation reveals capitalist culture's own anxiety about its nature. While the Bildungsromans seem as different as two accounts of growing into the world could possibly be, they both clearly represent acculturation as a process of production, a process interpersonal and intertextual. The monster's narrative is embedded within Victor's, which is embedded within Walton's letters to his sister (breaking the traditionally male cycle of the genre as a story of male acculturation to be read by young men in the process of their acculturation).<sup>7</sup> Through the embedded external narrative of *Paradise Lost*, the novel alternately casts Victor as God-like, Adamic, and Satanic, and the monster as Adamic and Satanic, and each character periodically refers to himself in such terms.<sup>8</sup> This revelation of the instability of produced identity, even between the extremes of creation itself, is the negative imprint of culture's anxiety about its own identity, its relation to nature and the nature of nature itself. Culture is produced, as the novel insists through its layers of intertextual Bildungsromans, and Victor and the monster are, in turn, products of acculturation and reproducers of culture. Negatively, this pattern reveals a troubling question, the same question imprinted in the monster's articulation, "What was I?": if nonhuman nature is as much "produced" as human nature, as evidenced by the monster, then what is human culture but one of the many cultures in nature?

As a pedagogical tool, one may wonder what this double Bildungsroman teaches and to whom. Ernest, as the only surviving member of the immediate Frankenstein family, is in some sense heir to this knowledge, though it is quite literally addressed to someone else. Perhaps, as Elizabeth had hoped, he broke with his father's wishes and, presumably, Victor's teachings, and became a farmer. While there is no evidence that Walton benefits from the lesson of Victor's experience, there is the possibility of Ernest, the possibility of a different relationship between nature and culture, a different outcome of acculturation. As it stands, the processes of acculturation represented in the novel, the interconnected Bildungsromans, reflect the monster's horrified articulation, "What was I?": human culture's fear of nonhuman agency and the objectification of humanity.

This fear, imprinted in the monster's narrative of his acquisition of language, is equally, and perhaps most clearly, present in Victor's initial reaction to the monster's gaze.

[B]y the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavored to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! —Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries

beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same color as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion, and straight black lips. ...Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep. (38-9)

Victor's shock at the sight of the monster's eyes is truly shock at the sight of the monster looking at him. It is not the aspect of his eyes, their color or the composition of the monster's visage (which, presumably, Victor was already quite aware of) but their aspect imbued with life, the monster's gaze, that causes Victor to flee in "breathless horror and disgust" (39). Negatively, this fear is the fear of objectification, the fear of being on the other end of subjectivity. To the mind of Western culture, the very fact of the nonhuman other's subjectivity, embodied in his gaze, threatens to do what human subjectivity often does: objectify and dominate.

Victor fears being produced as an object in his object's gaze; in rationalist culture, the spectator is always superior to the spectacle, the subject to all he senses. Negatively, this is the nightmare knowledge of Western consciousness, its life as the passive, helpless object of nature's agency. Just as it has made nonhuman nature monstrous, it fears being made monstrous. Sight, like language, represents subjectivity and agency ...which really boils down to power. Here vision serves as a mark of consciousness, and so nonhuman nature's vision of humanity (the monster's gaze at Victor) threatens this construction of human agency. Western culture goes to great lengths to insist that nonhuman animals look but do not see, make sound but do not speak. Victor's fear of the monster's gaze is the negative imprint of culture's fear of objectification, a fear imprinted as early as the narrative of Jehovah's insistence that Moses look not upon his face for fear of death. Here too power does not want to be seen, to be objectified in the gaze of another.

What is the relationship between the story of culture's reproduction, the Bildungsroman, and culture's fear of objectification, of oppression? The labyrinthine origins of culture, its production and reproduction, lead back to the phenomenon of the oceanic feeling and the discourse of monstrosity. The Bildungsroman, or story of coming into culture, is also the story of culture coming into us; its production is its reproduction ad infinitum. In this way, culture constructs itself as a "second nature," displacing nonhuman nature to the shadowy status of origin. It is no coincidence that narratives of coming into culture always begin inside culture; for culture, there is no arrival from without, only the realization that we are always already inside this second nature. From this point of view, the Bildungsroman appears as an insistence that there isn't anything out there; no there *there*, only the here of culture. In this context, the oceanic feeling reminds us that something, even someone, is out there. The oceanic feeling is another narrative of origins, one which insists on an elemental world encompassing the social world of culture (culture, in this context, as a mechanism to defend against an unpredictable and uncontrollable nature). Yet, in the world of second nature, this feeling is displaced into the overlapping categories of the sublime and the monstrous, the transcendent and the unnatural.

In *Frankenstein*, mountains and bodies of water appear by turns inspiring or threatening. The monster's relationship to the Alps characterizes them as monstrous, unnaturally large, jagged, and overwhelming, whereas Victor's experience of the mountains, before his encounter with



the monster, characterizes them as the repository of an awesome transcendence. There is a similar dynamic with the many bodies of water in the novel, from Lake Lemman to the North Sea and the Arctic Ocean. However, in the case of water, it is Walton, and not Victor, who frames the reader's experience, painting the Arctic Ocean as sublime. Here Robert describes Victor's reaction to the Arctic landscape: "Even broken spirited as he is, no one can feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature. The starry sky, the sea, and every sight afforded by these wonderful regions, seems still to have the power of elevating his soul from earth" (16). Though perhaps more of a description of Robert himself than his mysterious passenger, contrast the above passage with Victor's experience of the Orkneys and the North Sea:

It was a place fitted for such work, being hardly more than a rock, whose high sides were continually beaten upon by the waves. ...when the weather permitted, I walked on the stony beach of the sea, to listen to the waves as they roared, and dashed at my feet. It was a monotonous, yet ever-changing scene. I thought of Switzerland; it was far different from this desolate and appalling landscape. ...Its fair lakes reflect a blue and gentle sky; and, when troubled by the winds, their tumult is but the play of a lively infant, when compared to the roarings of the giant ocean. (136-7)

Later, after Victor's destruction of the half-formed female creature, he revisits the same beach, which he "almost regarded as an insuperable barrier between me and my fellow creatures; nay, a wish that such should prove the fact stole across me" (141). The size and sound of the ocean, compared to the infant-like size and swell of Lake Lemman, places it in the company of the unnaturally large monster and the Alps that he leaps across with agility. Described as beating and roaring, the ocean's violence seems both typically oceanic and oddly simian.

The Arctic Ocean, Robert's "country of eternal light" (5-6) is also the landscape into which the monster disappears, "borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance" (191). These contrasting views of the same landscape, and the *seeming* duality of representations of environment in general, as transcendent/sublime or unnatural/monstrous, reflect to some extent Shelley's experience of the actual environmental conditions of the novel's production. Both *Frankenstein* and *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* were composed, in greater part, during the coldest, wettest summer Europe had had in a hundred years – the summer of 1816. The weather, in fact, was so unusual that across Europe people claimed that the end of the world was at hand.<sup>9</sup> As John Clubbe writes in "The Tempest-toss'd Summer of 1816: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*" (and as other critics have noted with respect to Byron's "Darkness"<sup>10</sup>), the weather of 1816, during which Lake Lemman flooded, "may even be the single most determining influence upon the novel's creation" (27). Clubbe ties a moment in *Frankenstein*, quoted below, to a real moment in Shelley's experience: Victor sees the storm "from precisely the spot in which on 10 June Mary Shelley had originally seen it surging across the waters and had described it in much the same words" (34).

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 every thing seemed of a pitchy darkness, until the eye recovered itself from the preceding flash. ...

While I watched the storm, so beautiful yet terrific, I wandered on with a hasty step. This noble war in the sky elevated my spirits; I clasped my hands, and exclaimed aloud, "William, dear angel! this is thy funeral, this thy dirge!" As I said these words I perceived in the gloom a figure which stole from behind a clump of trees near me; I stood fixed, gazing intently: I could not be mistaken. 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 daemon to whom I had given life. ...Nothing in human shape could have destroyed that fair child. *He* was the murderer. (56)

Clubbe attributes the role of lightning in the novel, which appears as a creative and destructive force at key moments in the text, to the incredible storms the Shelleys witnessed that summer. His work suggests that it isn't a coincidence that *Frankenstein* is a tale "of the human psyche in agonized conflict with the supernatural" (26).

I will take this a step further. The weather, indeed the entire environmental conditions of novel's composition, also impacted *Frankenstein* negatively, as culture's terror of nature's agency – of oceans and storms and jagged peaks – as the horror of the nonhuman in the figure of the monster. The conflict with the supernatural is, in fact, a conflict with the idea of being part of nature, with the fact of human animality. The passage above is significant not only because it links Shelley's lived experience of the nonhuman world to the text, but also because it links the power and agency of nonhuman nature to the person of the monster (this is reflected in form as well as content; just as the ocean seems somewhat simian in a later passage, here the monster appears almost elemental). As these two are fused, so are Victor and the monster, making Victor the murderer, rather than the keeper, of his brother. Victor's moment of "elevated" spirits, in which his solitary grief and rage seem passively reflected in the environmental conditions around him, becomes one of horror and disgust with the appearance of the monster. In this same scene, Victor refers to him as wretch, daemon, devil, being, creature, and, significantly, "*the animal*" (57, *emphasis mine*). Though he considers the monster "nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me," Victor denies his own animality when he calls the monster "the animal" (57). Again, "nothing in human shape" could have destroyed the "angel" William, only something animal or elemental, "a blot upon the earth," as the monster calls himself, "a disfiguring spot or mark" ("Blot"). Uncannily, the monster is also both "a moral stain" and "an obliteration by way of correction" ("Blot"); he embodies death and destruction both as an example of and corrective to the arrogance of Western culture. In several senses, he is also a reminder of culture's status as product of the natural world. The supernatural language (the "angel" William and "vampire" monster) and plot of the novel are displacements of (and placeholders for) a far more earthly and earthy terror.

An ecocultural reading of *Frankenstein* suggests that the influences of nonhuman nature permeate content and form. As several critics have noted,<sup>11</sup> the fantastic thunderstorms that move throughout the text, and indeed all of the descriptions of the Alps in the novel, are drawn from Shelley's actual time in the region recorded in *History* and in her letters. In a variety of ways, this experience is figured in the person of the monster. The connections between nonhuman nature and the produced body of the monster surface in the monster himself – a nonhuman creature and a product of human culture (and acculturation). As such, he expresses

Western culture's fear of its Other. *Frankenstein* registers this terror of nonhuman agency as, in part, an anxiety of objectification. In second nature the oceanic feeling becomes the fear of monstrosity. But, as always, it is we who objectify; the horror of *Frankenstein* is a horror of ourselves.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Warren Montag, "The 'Workshop of Filthy Creation:' A Marxist Reading of *Frankenstein*" (395).
- <sup>2</sup> Paul O'Flinn, "Production and Reproduction: The Case of *Frankenstein*" (26).
- <sup>3</sup> Elsie B. Michie's "*Frankenstein* and Marx's Theories of Alienated Labor" comes closest to this realization. She argues that using Marx's descriptions of alienation to read the novel closely reveals Victor as the alienated worker and the creature as the externalization of his alienation (94-95). From this perspective, the materials used to make the creature signify production's breakdown of the natural world into the dead components of manufacture, as well as the worker's alienation from the natural world, his senses, and the materiality of production (the monster figures here also as a representation of materiality, signified by his incredible size) (96). While Michie doesn't spend much time examining actual descriptions of nonhuman nature, she does acknowledge that nature might serve a purpose in the text beyond a simple repression of the modern.
- <sup>4</sup> A case in point, Freud analyzes this feeling as unnecessary, a residual persistence of an original psyche. At the beginning of *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud discusses the "oceanic feeling," a phrase derived from the term by which his friend describes the sensation of the world as limitlessness or eternal, "unbounded – as it were, 'oceanic'" (11). It is "a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole" (12). This discussion serves as a bridge between *Future of an Illusion*, on religious feeling, and *Civilization*, on the future of the human species. Freud comes to the conclusion that the oceanic feeling does not present a strong enough claim to be the source of religious feeling because, "a feeling can only be a source of energy [for another feeling] if it is itself the expression of a strong need" (20). He assumes that the oceanic feeling is not the expression of a primary need in part because he can find no trace of this feeling in himself.
- <sup>5</sup> "Positively" and "negatively" inscribed responses to nonhuman nature (somewhat analogous to photographic images recorded as negatives and developed as positives) coexist simultaneously.
- <sup>6</sup> In the notes to the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau writes, "Without ceremony our travelers take for beasts, under the name *pongos*, *mandrills*, *orangutans*, the same beings that the ancients, under the names *satyrs*, *fauns*, *sylvans*, took for divinities. Perhaps, after more precise research, it will be found that they are neither animals nor gods, but men" (209).
- <sup>7</sup> With this pattern in mind, the monster's tale as the core narrative is the most intertextual, even to the point of invoking another Bildungsroman as part of the monster's acculturation, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*.
- <sup>8</sup> Paul Cantor argues that Shelley condenses the thematic content of Milton's epic into two characters, thereby also doubling the Prometheus myth (103-5). As he has it, the role of Satan is divided between Victor and the monster, who also respectively represent God and Adam; in this way, God and his creation are both promethean and satanic (105).
- <sup>9</sup> Looking back from 1979, *Scientific American* published an article on this mysterious summer, possibly caused by bursts of sunspots, titled, "The Year Without a Summer."
- <sup>10</sup> For example, see Jonathan Bate's "Living with the Weather."
- <sup>11</sup> Including Anne K. Mellor.

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