

Ler História

78 | 2021

Mobility and Displacement in and around the Mediterranean

Dossier: Mobility and Displacement in and around the Mediterranean. A Historical Approach

The Pathless Seas: Configuring Displacement in British Romanticism

*Mares sem destinos: o desenraizamento no romantismo britânico**Les mers vierges: penser le déplacement dans le romantisme britannique*

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p. 85-107

<https://doi.org/10.4000/lerhistoria.8328>

Resumos

English Português Français

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) narrativizes exile and displacement by enacting these thematically and formally at almost every level of the text. Exploring human movement and the possibility of human community, it constitutes Shelley's response not only to her personal circumstances, but also to a Europe riven by twenty-three years of war. This essay considers the novel's philosophical project of hospitality and friendship through the movements of Victor Frankenstein and his "Creature", tracking their attempts to forge social and emotional bonds in the face of successive displacements from family, nation, and humanity generally. This article is part of the special theme section on *Mobility and Displacement in and around the Mediterranean: A Historical Approach*, guest-edited by Cátia Antunes and Giedrė Blažytė.

Frankenstein (1818), de Mary Shelley, romantiza o exílio e o desenraizamento, apresentando ambos de forma temática e formal a todos os níveis textuais. Ao explorar a mobilidade humana e a possibilidade de criação de comunidades humanas, este livro traduz a reação de Shelley ao seu próprio contexto individual, mas também de uma Europa destruída por vinte e três anos de guerras. Este artigo analisa o projeto filosófico desta obra acerca dos conceitos de hospitalidade e amizade, através das personagens de Victor Frankenstein e da sua "Criatura", seguindo as suas tentativas de forjar laços sociais e emocionais, após sofrerem sucessivos processos de desenraizamento em relação à família, à nação e à humanidade em geral. Este artigo faz parte do dossier temático *Mobilidade e desenraizamento no Mediterrâneo em perspetiva histórica*, organizado por Cátia Antunes e Giedrė Blažytė.

Publié à Londres en 1818, le *Frankenstein* de Mary Shelley aborde les thèmes de l'exil et du déplacement en les mettant en scène d'une façon thématique et formelle à presque tous les niveaux du texte. Explorant les mouvements des individus et la possibilité de former une communauté humaine, il constitue la réponse de Shelley non seulement à sa situation personnelle, mais aussi à une Europe déchirée par vingt-trois ans de guerre. Cet article examine le



projet philosophique d'hospitalité et d'amitié du roman à travers les mouvements de Victor Frankenstein et de sa «Créature», en suivant leurs tentatives de créer et d'entretenir des liens sociaux et émotionnels face aux déplacements successifs de la famille, de la nation et de l'humanité en général. Cet article fait partie du dossier *Mobilités et déplacements en Méditerranée: une approche historique*, dirigé par Cátia Antunes et Giedrė Blažytė.

Entradas no índice

Mots-clés : romantisme, déplacement, exil, géographie mentale, Mary Shelley, Royaume Uni.

Keywords: romanticism, displacement, exile, imaginative geography, Mary Shelley, Nineteenth-century Britain.

Palavras-chave: romantismo, desenraizamento, exílio, geografias imaginárias, Mary Shelley, Grã-Bretanha.

Notas do autor

This paper was financially supported by the COST ACTION project *People in Motion: Entangled Histories of Displacement Across the Mediterranean (1492-1923)*(PIMo) as a result of the PIMo workshop “Movement and Displacement”, Centro de História, University of Lisbon, 9-10 March 2020.

Texto integral

- 1 It is curious that perhaps the most archetypal figure of British Romantic humanism is neither British, nor even wholly human. For, in spite of its title, Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* is arguably not about its projected protagonist “Frankenstein”, but rather his “hideous progeny”, an unnamed “Creature” composed of human and animal parts, brought to life by the scientist's ambition and set on a path of exile from every form of human community.¹ This is, however, only the first of the novel's many displacements: its imaginative geography is equally complex and significant. Centred in continental Europe (Italy, Switzerland, and Germany), its key encounters and cataclysmic events spiral outward and northward in a series of liminal spaces: first the *Mer de Glace* on Mont Blanc; next the isolated Orkneys, and finally the icy wastes of the Arctic Ocean. The framed structure of the novel underscores these repetitions and movements, setting multiple narratives inside one another like a set of Chinese lacquered boxes.
- 2 Why does Shelley set such significant parts of her novel outside Britain? The narrative moves in a deliberative northward geographical thrust, I want to suggest, because its characters are themselves constantly moving. Whether exiled or exiling themselves, they pursue education, curiosity, and pleasure; escape religious, cultural, or political persecution; and seek resolution or revenge. But beyond its restless narrative action, the novel thematizes movement and exile at almost every level, with Frankenstein's Creature absorbing and articulating the suffering of the outsider in a particularly powerful configuration of radical physical difference. So dislocated from human community is Frankenstein's Creature, that the Arctic circle – the “last frontier” of early nineteenth-century scientific knowledge – becomes his only possible “home”. Shelley's unfolding of the tragedy of human displacement – the novel's plea for hospitality, sympathy, and the cultivation of protective social bonds – is characteristic of the radical compassionate politics of British Romanticism, and continues to resonate with a wide range of readers. My reading focuses on this philosophical project in *Frankenstein*, specifically tracking its powerful imaginative geographies – from South to North, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Arctic Ocean – to explore Shelley's Romantic vocabulary of otherness and dislocation. Such a focus on the novel's exploration of movement, exile, and ostracism restores to our reading an awareness of Shelley's own peripatetic circumstances at the time she wrote *Frankenstein*; the role of the Arctic circle in the contemporary cultural imaginary; and the wider conditions of massed displacement across Britain and Europe after the Battle of Waterloo.



3 *Frankenstein* lies at the heart of British Romanticism in more than one way. Published at the centre of this historical period, it was written by a very young woman, the daughter of two pre-eminent “first generation” radical philosophers and writers, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, and the partner of the “second-generation” Romantic poet Percy Shelley. The novel draws on both of these connections, inheriting the revolutionary politics of the 1790s while sharing the wider Romantic critique of empiricism and the desire, at once Wordsworthian and Shelleyan, to “see into the life of things” (Wordsworth 1798, 204). It marks a growing suspicion of scientific experimentation and its violent powers, and mounts “a blistering critique of Romantic egotism” (Schor 2003, 2). Depending on one’s perspective, either Frankenstein or his Creature are paradigmatic Romantic subjects. Each is curious, observant, articulate, and self-reflective; formed by human language and culture in specific landscapes (Switzerland, Italy and the Arctic north); and preoccupied with human consciousness, perfectibility, and memory. Frankenstein and the Creature’s shared traits and preoccupations have led commentators to call each the *doppelgänger* of the other (Massey 1979, 128; Jackson 1986, 46; Buenza 2018). But the novel is perhaps at its most “Romantic” in its devastating exploration of social and emotional bonds *in extremis*. Frankenstein, and more particularly his Creature, at once seek, and are denied, family, friendship, and national and international community. Their growing isolation, moreover, comes always with a geographic component that acts as a measure of their psychic dislocation. This is perhaps why, although *Frankenstein* is located at the heart of British Romanticism, it is not located *in* Britain. Instead it is centred in Europe, only revisiting its other “home” in a kind of reverse and diabolical “Grand Tour” of the British Isles in Volume II.



1. The “Great Enterprise”

4 This removal or dislocation of the narrative from Britain in its key framing episodes (Walton’s first encounter with Frankenstein in the Arctic Circle, and Frankenstein’s critical exchange with the Creature on Mont Blanc) is far from incidental. The geography of *Frankenstein* is carefully planned and overtly symbolic: in its detail we can read much of Shelley’s humanistic conception of, and project for, her post-Napoleonic War novel, and her interest in the polar north – what Adriana Craciun (2011, 435) has described as “a geo-imaginary region enjoying unprecedented public interest” at this period. *Frankenstein* opens famously with the gentleman explorer and failed poet Robert Walton writing to his sister Margaret while waiting to begin an expedition to find the North Pole. He will commence his journey from St. Petersburg, travelling to Archangel (on the northernmost coast and just below the Arctic Circle) and then carving a path through “the immense seas” to the north. “I cannot describe to you” he writes to his sister, “my sensations on the near prospect of my undertaking”:

It is impossible to communicate to you a conception of the trembling sensation, half pleasurable and half fearful, with which I am preparing to depart. I am going to unexplored regions, to “the land of mist and snow;” but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety. (11)²

5 Walton’s journey is scientific but also psychological: it is in fact presided over by the figure of Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner”, whom Walton gives credit for “my attachment to, my passionate enthusiasm for, the dangerous mysteries of the ocean”.³ In preparing for his “great enterprise”, Walton appears preoccupied less by his isolation than his loneliness: “But I have one want which I have never yet been able to satisfy... I have no friend, Margaret” (10). Heroic endeavour is made incomplete without (male) companionship, and Walton’s project is fundamentally undermined by his inability to share it with another. “When I am glowing with the enthusiasm of success, there will be none to participate my joy” he explains; “if I am assailed by disappointment, no one will endeavour to sustain me in dejection” (10). In many ways, Walton’s drive northward to



the Pole is made an outward manifestation of this more fundamental quest for sympathetic connection and intimacy, and he spends the first part of his expedition wishing for “the company of a man who could sympathize with me; whose eyes would reply to mine” (10), and some opportunity to communicate his feeling to another in person (writing is, Walton believes, a “poor medium” of exchange).

- 6 St. Petersburg is a typically suggestive location in the late eighteenth-century setting of the story. Trading and diplomatic communities had, over the course of the century, forged a frontier – the *Angliiskayaperspektiva*, “English Embankment” or “English Line” along the River Neva, a kind of Anglo-Russian border between Enlightenment civility and northern “barbarity” (Cross 1993 and 1997). Shelley thus opens her novel in a significant space of transition, and Walton’s overland journey from the Petrine capital to Archangel represents his literal and symbolic movement beyond the pale of European civilisation. Leaving Archangel, Victor sails through the Barents Sea into the Arctic Ocean; there he is suspended, the ship moored in pack ice. At this juncture the narrative is – unusually – geographically imprecise. From the deck of his ship, Walton can describe only “vast and irregular plains of ice, which seemed to have no end” (13), a scene of profound disorientation and dislocation perfectly placed to bring forth an uncanny apparition:

We perceived a low carriage, fixed on a sledge and drawn by dogs, pass on towards the north, at the distance of half a mile: a being which had the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic stature, sat in the sledge, and guided the dogs. We watched the rapid progress of the traveller with our telescopes, until he was lost among the distant inequalities of the ice. This appearance excited our unqualified wonder... Shut in, however, by ice, it was impossible to follow his track, which we had observed with the greatest attention. (13)

- 7 Its appearance amid the mist and ice, “many hundred miles from any land”, means it is unclear whether this is a spectre or a man: “a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island” (13). Significantly the sailors move between two poles of seeing: scientific observation (undertaken through the telescope and calculating likely distance from land), and “unqualified wonder” (13). This first encounter is followed swiftly by a second, and Walton and his shipmates board an emaciated stranger. Circumspect, harrowed, and oppressed by feeling, Victor Frankenstein is nevertheless instantly recognised by Walton as a “divine wanderer” (17) and “brother of my heart” (15).

- 8 This first frame narrative of scientific ambition and masculinised encounter between Walton and Frankenstein is set pointedly at the fringes of the Arctic circle, marking both men’s extreme ambition, and their removal outside European communal values. Recent critical discussion has emphasized the profound influence of early nineteenth-century Arctic exploration on the novel in this opening encounter: Adriana Craciun (2011, 437) has detailed *Frankenstein’s* enmeshment in contemporary polar writing, particularly the novel’s “proximity to the center of polar print culture”; Jen Hill (2008, 3) has revealed polar space as a “heart of whiteness” in the European geographical imaginary, representing “the limit of both empire and human experience”. But these “vast and irregular plains of ice” enclose the novel’s Arctic “other” and temperate European centre. Through Victor’s first-person narration of his story – the second frame narrative of the novel – the reader is returned immediately to central and southern Europe as Frankenstein relates the circumstances of his life.

- 9 It is worth retracing the precise imaginative geography presented by Frankenstein’s tale, as it becomes clear that the novel continues to map key events and exchanges in symbolic landscapes. “I AM by birth a Genevese”, Victor declares in opening his story: “and my family is one of the most distinguished of that republic” (17). Frankenstein’s autobiography is thus remarkably emplaced, even in the earlier generations. He describes, for instance, his mother’s early experience of exile to Lucerne, brought on by her father’s pride over the loss of the family fortune, which causes him to conceal his whereabouts from his close friend Frankenstein, Victor’s father. Arriving to Lucerne after several months’ search, Victor’s father finds his friend dead and his daughter



weeping in despair: “He came like a protecting spirit to the poor girl, who committed herself to his care”, relates Victor: “Two years after this event Caroline became his wife” (19). Their adored only child, Victor continues in security and love at Geneva until their family is increased by another adoption. Elizabeth Lavenza, the daughter of Mr Frankenstein’s sister, is collected from Italy, possibly Venice, after the death of her mother. First “playfellow”, then friend, this step-sister is designed to become Victor’s wife (echoing Caroline Beaufort’s incorporation a generation earlier). Fixed at Geneva, the Frankensteins’ domestic circle grows to include two younger brothers Ernest and William, and Victor’s closest friend Henry Clerval:

Such was our domestic circle, from which care and pain seemed for ever banished. My father directed our studies, and my mother partook of our enjoyments. Neither of us possessed the slightest pre-eminence over the other; the voice of command was never heard amongst us; but mutual affection engaged us all to comply with and obey the slightest desire of each other. (24)

- 10 The family is formed in the image of the republic – peaceable, democratic, self-contained, and civil. The first hint of danger comes with a family trip to Thonon, or Thonon-les-Bains, on the southern shores of Lake Geneva. Here Victor chances upon the work of occultist Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), and a “new light seemed to dawn upon my mind” (21). Victor’s self-directed studies expand to include the German physician and mystic Paracelsus (1493-1541) and alchemist Albertus Magnus (c. 1200-1280), and his dangerous attraction to the arcane sciences is fired. Back at Geneva – the text specifically identifies the family’s country house at Belrive (Bellerive) – his scientific curiosity is further transfixed, this time by the discovery of electricity, which Shelley presents as a singularly destructive force:

I remained, while the storm lasted, watching its progress with curiosity and delight. As I stood at the door, on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump. [...] I never beheld anything so utterly destroyed. (23)

- 11 The passage presents a carefully balanced allegory, where Victor’s curiosity and delight at the power of lightning outweigh any horror he might feel at its destructive power; and where each object, tree and light, themselves possess further symbolic significance. In one possible reading, the “dazzling light” of knowledge has the power to obliterate the “old and beautiful oak” of family tradition and nurturing stability. The novel thus places these two human needs, for family and knowledge, in tension with one another – a conflict that is underscored when Victor is sent at age seventeen to the university at Ingolstadt to continue his education. He experiences this journey as a form of banishment: “I threw myself into the chaise that was to convey me away, and indulged in the most melancholy reflections. I, who had ever been surrounded by amiable companions, continually engaged in endeavouring to bestow mutual pleasure, I was now alone” (26). Here, movement heralds other forms of displacement: of the affections, of giving and receiving pleasure, of the self.
- 12 Expatriated to Ingolstadt and beyond the tempering influence of his domestic circle, Victor finds his independence of thought at once amplified and unfettered. What had been nurtured even in the security of Geneva is given free rein in Ingolstadt, home of the famous medical university and anatomy theatre and, perhaps even more suggestively, the secretive eighteenth-century society of the Illuminati (Barruel 1797; Crook 2017; Taylor 2004).⁴ At Ingolstadt Victor becomes “engaged, heart and soul” (32) in the realisation of his terrible project. Spending the days with his books and the nights among “vaults and charnel houses” (30), he cuts himself off from all correspondence with his family, living a secret life even as he uncovers the secret of life. His discovery is at once hard-won and esoteric, enfolding scientific curiosity with the secrets of fairy tales:



Not that, like a magic scene, it all opened upon me at once: the information I had obtained was of a nature rather to direct my endeavours so soon as I should point them towards the object of my search, than to exhibit that object already accomplished. I was like the Arabian who had been buried with the dead, and found a passage to life aided only by one glimmering, and seemingly ineffectual, light. (31)

- 13 Alone in his laboratory, Frankenstein assembles the forbidden materials of the “dissecting room and the slaughter house” (32), infusing “the spark of life” (169) into his creation: “I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs” (34). As with the aftermath of the lightning strike, however, this scene of animation is not the triumph Frankenstein had anticipated, but a terrible failure. The Creature is neither beautiful nor admirable:

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured 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 colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips. (34)

- 14 The description of this being’s body is remarkable for how it configures different aesthetic criteria so that they are at odds with both nature and one another. Thus, while the Creature’s musculature strains against the skin that contains it, its hair and teeth pall through their saturation of colour; this vibrancy of “lustrous black” and “pearly whiteness” in turn jars with the “yellow skin” and “watery eyes” which darkly recall both the graveyard and scattered racial markers. However much Frankenstein has intended each part to be beautiful, when collected they fail to cohere into recognizable human form. Reflecting its disparate component parts, the Creature’s body and features here function as a map of its scattered origins, its parts literally and aesthetically exiled from their original bodies and from each other.

- 15 The terrain mapped here, moreover, remains fundamentally unclear, even abject: it is not just that the creature is made of both human (“charnel”) and animal (“slaughterhouse”) parts; it is that we never fully understand which parts are and are not human. Still more revealing perhaps, is the passage’s representation of Frankenstein’s misplaced feeling. Focused wholly on the aesthetic failure that is the Creature, he fails to understand the moral implications of his actions. Horrified and disgusted by its appearance, Frankenstein immediately abandons the “miserable monster” by fleeing the laboratory to his bedchamber. Shelley presents the scene as a profound failure of human feeling in Frankenstein, who, awakened to the horror of what he has done, refuses then to accept the responsibilities that come with creation. When the Creature seeks him again later, appearing at the end of his bed like a ghost or a child, smiling and calling, Frankenstein compounds the rejection, fleeing his lodging and forsaking his Creature once again.

2. Mont Blanc: the “waves of a troubled sea”

- 16 The apparently incidental detail of Frankenstein’s early life thus establishes a powerful geographical imaginary for the events of the novel. Having created not just human life but a trans-special being, the novel shifts its geography from Ingolstadt first to Geneva, then through the Alps and the British Isles, and finally to the most extreme regions of the globe. The spatial logic is one of centre and margin, where both the stakes and moral danger of the action can be measured by the geographies within which they take place. Victor might attempt to return to his earlier life in Geneva, but his doing so



now spreads death and destruction. His younger brother is murdered and the family servant Justine convicted and executed for the crime. Convinced of the Creature's responsibility for these actions, Victor begins a pursuit that leads him to the isolated formations of Mont Blanc to encounter his Creature for a second time. Here, Frankenstein's lone ascent to the *Mer de Glace* draws powerfully from the Shelleys' earlier responses to the landscape in the *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817): Victor's contemplation of a "sea of ice" lying within the mountains directly echoes Walton's journey into his own scene of "terrific" desolation. Identically composed of low-lying mists and seas of fractured ice, both landscapes stand as almost textbook embodiments of the Burkean sublime: overwhelming, deadly, and drawing on powers beyond human scale or comprehension (Burke 1757, 13-14, 41-56):

Presently a breeze dissipated the cloud, and I descended upon the glacier. The surface is very uneven, rising like the waves of a troubled sea, descending low, and interspersed by rifts that sink deep. The field of ice is almost a league in width, but I spent nearly two hours in crossing it. [...] The sea, or rather the vast river of ice, wound among its dependent mountains, whose aerial summits hung over its recesses. Their icy and glittering peaks shone in the sunlight over the clouds. My heart, which was before sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy; I exclaimed – "Wandering spirits, if indeed ye wander, and do not rest in your narrow beds, allow me this faint happiness, or take me, as your companion, away from the joys of life." (64-65)

17 Just as Walton invokes Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, a spirit of restless and unpredictable power, on the frozen Arctic sea, so also Frankenstein calls on the "wandering spirits" of this place to support his own feelings. In both passages there is a form of suicidal ideation emerging. While Walton faintly jokes he will "kill no albatross", Frankenstein makes a more direct bargain: "Allow me happiness, or take me... away from the joys of life" (65). Here on Mont Blanc the setting at once corroborates and stands as a measure of what is to come, as Frankenstein crosses both landscapes and ontological registers: from land to "sea", from habitable to uninhabitable, from humane to inhumane, from the natural world to that of spirits. In this sense, the novel's patterns of symbolic repetition, both of character and landscape, set the scene for a cataclysmic encounter. In just such an icy setting, Walton's crew sighted first the Creature and then, shortly after, Frankenstein. And here on the "sea, or rather vast river of ice" of the *Mer de Glace*, the narrative stages their second critical meeting.⁵

18 Frankenstein greets his "daemon" with "detestation and contempt" on Mont Blanc, a reception the creature has fully anticipated now that he has grown to understand his exclusion from human society. "All men hate the wretched", he declares bitterly; "how then must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things!" (65). The contrast between the being's superhuman body and profoundly human voice at this point in the novel is startling. Using, for the first time, the power of speech, the Creature asks simply that his story be heard, forcefully articulating the plight of the powerless and dispossessed:

I entreat you to hear me, before you give vent to your hatred on my devoted head. Have I not suffered enough, that you seek to increase my misery?... I am thy creature, and I will be even mild and docile to my natural lord and king, if thou wilt also perform thy part, the which thou owest me. (66)

19 The Creature's claim on Frankenstein's sympathetic attention is made in terms of Christian and filial bonds, and within the language of natural justice: "Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other, and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due" (66). In a desperate bargain that echoes Frankenstein's own, the Creature reminds Frankenstein of his obligations as a father-creator, demanding that those familial bonds be honoured, and that the cost of rejection is violence and unhappiness:



Remember that I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Every where I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous. (66)

20 He insists that although he was created benevolent (even by the man who has betrayed him), he was made a “fiend” by misunderstanding and prejudice. In this exchange the Creature is no longer visible to us as a “monster” (a devisibilisation which the novel explicitly marks by the Creature attempting to place his hands over Frankenstein’s eyes to hide his “detested form” [67]). Instead it is his voice in the mountain hut, quiet and articulate, which forms for us a different Creature, a sensitive sorrowing subject who describes – with exquisite sensibility – the emergence of his senses and growing understanding of the world in the “original *aera* of my being” (68).

21 In this section of the novel Shelley produces a remarkable depiction of developing consciousness, sensation, and education, detailing the effects of trauma and neglect on the child. For the Creature becomes a child, and we – as readers – witness the childhood that Frankenstein has denied him. The Creature’s formative experiences with human society are only ever frightening (as with the shepherd who abandons his hut on seeing him) or violent (as when he is attacked by an entire village he approaches in hunger), and this “barbarity of man” (71) propels his retreat from human society. At the centre of the Creature’s story is his discovery of the De Lacey family and his growing attachment to the poor cottagers. Learning first language and then literacy from observing them, he assists the family, unknown, providing them with wood, clearing snow, and easing the labour of both the young man and woman. He recognises and reciprocates their feelings intuitively: “The gentle manners and beauty of the cottagers greatly endeared them to me; when they were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys” (75). But despite the Creature’s instinctive practice of these obligations of the social contract and sympathetic bonds with his adopted family *avant la lettre*, they too ultimately reject him based on his appearance when he reveals himself to the old man.

22 The complexity of Shelley’s compound narrative structure of the novel creates a dramatic contrast between the Creature’s story and the two framing narratives that preceded it. Walton and Frankenstein’s ambition and self-absorption stand in powerful opposition to the innocence and yearning of the unnamed Creature. Where they abandon family and society, the Creature is abandoned. Significantly, the Creature represents himself to Frankenstein as now an indissoluble part of the desolated landscape in which he has confronted his creator, reduced to its isolation and barrenness by human hatred. “The desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge”, he tells Frankenstein: “I have wandered here many days; the caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me, and the only one which man does not grudge. These bleak skies I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow-beings” (66). Residing apart from human habitation, this “desert” landscape of the inland sea of ice also lies beyond human ken, abandoned and unknowable.

23 For Shelley (as for Walton, and Coleridge), places like Mont Blanc and the Arctic north are not only physically remote, they retain a deep lingering numinousness. Published almost equidistantly between the 1818 and 1831 editions of *Frankenstein*, Shelley’s essay “On Ghosts” (1824) provides a catalogue of spaces left in the world that retain these elements of the supernatural. Lamenting the loss of magic in the modern world, Shelley describes a contracted and subjected globe that stands in stark contrast to the vivid imaginative topography of the past:

The globe was then encircled by a wall which paled in the bodies of men, whilst their feathered thoughts soared over the boundary; it had a brink, and in the deep profound which it overhung, men’s imaginations, eagle-winged, dived and flew, and brought home strange tales to their believing auditors. Deep caverns harboured giants; cloudlike birds cast their shadows upon the plains... Where are they now? The Fortunate Isles have lost the glory that spread a halo round them; for who deems himself nearer to the golden age, because he touches at the Canaries on his voyage to India. Our only riddle is the rise of the Niger; the interior



of New Holland, our only terra incognita; and our sole *mare incognitum*, the north-west passage. (Shelley 1824, 253)

24 If the north-west passage presents for Walton one *mare incognitum*, then Victor encounters a landscape equally unmarked and unknown by human endeavour on Mont Blanc. Both are “brink” spaces lying beyond the encircling walls of human knowledge, and in both one may still encounter magical and supernatural beings, “cloudlike birds” and “giants”. It is this logic of the numinous – of the superhuman and the supernatural – that most clearly brings the scenes at Mont Blanc and on the Arctic ice in dialogue with one another in the novel. These contingent landscapes provide isolated but reciprocated settings for the key events of the narrative (Cavell 2017).

25 Just as Victor and Walton are versions of one another, the frozen landscapes of the *Mer de Glace* and the Arctic Ocean are connected by their role in the European imagination (Nardin 1999). Adriana Craciun (2011, 438n5) reads the relationship between the two, uncannily, as another form of displacement: “Shelley’s Arctic reflects a transplanted alpine sublime”. Both provide isolated and sublime landscapes suitable for the exchange of foundational myths. In one the Creature tells Frankenstein his story; in the other Frankenstein relays his story to Walton, thus producing the text in its framed forms. But these frozen wastes are connected by more than their epic isolation. Both are strangely blank landscapes, inviting and disorientating, like empty pages in a book. They are, at the turn of the nineteenth century, as yet unexplored and unscripted: at once the spaces of mythic encounter with monsters, spirits, and supernatural beings, and sites of growing scientific and commercial curiosity for Britons and Europeans alike (Hill 2008, 16). Recent commentators on the novel have persuasively noted the power of these scenes, connecting, as Jessica Richard (2003, 296) puts it, “Victor’s tale of over-reaching” to “the Arctic expeditions that were about to set sail” at the time of the novel’s publication. But I am interested here in these twinned spaces as imaginative sites of exile and social breakdown, punctuating and directing the distinctive geography of the text. To place the Creature there – to have him claim that space as his own, and survive there – changes his ontological status from “human” to something else: perhaps superhuman, perhaps semi-divine.



3. Mare nostrum, mare incognitum

26 Scholars have long noted that geography matters in *Frankenstein*, charting the novel’s dialogue with early nineteenth-century writing about alpine and polar exploration, and noting the overt symbolism of Ingolstadt. Fewer have noticed the novel’s odd attentiveness to specific European locations, and the rate of human movement between, both of which Shelley maps with precision. England holds a peculiarly compressed, featureless role in this, the novel’s imaginative geography, seeming barely to touch Frankenstein’s consciousness. His major referent is England’s resemblance (or lack of) to Switzerland; London’s “men of genius and talent” are of secondary interest to a traveller “impatient to arrive at the termination of my journey” (112). This termination proves, once again, to lie at the margins: first on a barren Orkney island where Frankenstein works to form a mate for the Creature, and then again in Ireland where the Creature murders Clerval in bitter revenge. My own essay reconnects the novel’s distinctive geographical imaginaries – its juxtaposition of wild margins and cultivated centres, and its traversal of contiguous seas – as part of a sustained exploration of human dislocation and displacement. *Frankenstein’s* arctic *telos* can sometimes obscure its temperate origin in the Italian and French Mediterranean, but it is to this centre – from which the violence and displacement originate – that I want to return.

27 There are, after all, not two but *three* seas in *Frankenstein*: the Arctic, the *Mer de Glace*, and the Mediterranean. Shelley’s revised third edition of the novel, published in 1831, amplifies its Mediterranean centre through some small but significant changes. In



the 1831 edition, Frankenstein's parents remove immediately after their marriage from Switzerland to "the pleasant climate of Italy" (1831, 33), and Victor is born not at Geneva but at Naples. Elizabeth Lavenza, a first cousin on his father's side in the 1818 edition, becomes an orphaned outsider in Shelley's 1831 revisions. Her bright golden hair and exquisite fairness stand out among the poor cottages clustered along the shores of Lake Como, and she is discovered to be the daughter of Milanese nobleman, one of the *schiaivi ognor frementi*, now political prisoner at Vienna. Elizabeth is removed from her "rustic guardians" by the Frankensteins, becoming "the inmate of my parents' house – my more than sister – the beautiful and adored companion of all my occupations and my pleasures" (1831, 35). Thus, in the 1831 edition of the novel, Italy becomes more pronouncedly the serene domestic centre of the family, the centre of birth and growth: Victor spends the formative part of his life there and in France before returning to Geneva, and presumably school, at fifteen years old.

28 The effect of Shelley's changes in the 1831 edition of the novel are highly suggestive, developing the implicit psychogeography of the first edition into a more pronounced plotting of physical and psychic dislocation: Frankenstein's education, self-absorption, and estrangement are configured more explicitly as successive movements away from Italy and the Mediterranean. But the novel's journey from centre to northern periphery, from *mare nostrum* to *mare incognitum* is firmly anchored in both editions by a final embedded narrative. Lying at the very centre of the novel within the De Lacey's tale – noticed but rarely considered at length by critics, or connected with the larger geographical imaginary of the novel – is one final story of displacement. In the narrative's logic of echo and repetition, the story of Safie – an "Arabian" stranger – mirrors and reconfigures the Creature's own. The Creature himself introduces her tale as "the more moving part of my story [...] [the] events that impressed me with feelings which, from what I was, *have made me what I am*" (77, my emphasis).

29 While the Creature watches them in their cottage, the De Lacey's poor but virtuous existence is interrupted by the arrival of a stranger, a veiled lady on horseback. Her presence represents the *denouement* of the larger tale: the Creature learns her story and that of the cottagers simultaneously, and begins to understand his own, even more fundamental, exile. The daughter of a Christian Arab mother and a Turkish merchant, Safie, had only recently come from Constantinople to join her father in Paris, where he was a long-time resident. She arrives just prior to his imprisonment by the French state. The reasons for his trial and condemnation to death are unknown, but represented broadly as racism and Islamophobia by the text: "All Paris was indignant; and it was judged that his religion and wealth, rather than the crime alleged against him, had been the cause of his condemnation" (82). Present at the trial, Felix De Lacey is outraged by its patent injustice. His noble efforts to intervene on behalf of the "unfortunate Mahometan", we learn, are the direct cause of his own family's "perpetual exile" from France to the cottage in the German woods. Delivering the Turk from imprisonment to Livorno, Felix meets Safie and they fall in love. Both, however, are ultimately betrayed by the prejudice of Safie's father, who "loathed the idea that his daughter should be united to Christian" (84) and issues a "tyrannical mandate" that she return with him to Constantinople. Sickened "at the prospect of again returning to Asia, and [...] being immured within the walls of a haram, allowed only to occupy herself with puerile amusements" (83), Safie gathers her jewellery and a small sum of money, and escapes in search of the De Laceys. She is met, as the Creature observes, with hospitality on the part of old Mr De Lacey and Agatha, and with joy by Felix.

30 The significance of Safie's story at the centre of *Frankenstein* cannot, I think, be overstated here. By placing an Arabic-speaking woman's voice at the heart of the multiple narratives, the novel forces us to reconsider the stories of its other women: particularly the ways in which Caroline Beaufort and Elizabeth Lavenza are dislocated from their own families and absorbed (sometimes problematically) in Frankenstein's patrilineage. Safie's betrayal by her father recalls the effective abandonment of the novel's other women (Caroline Beaufort, Elizabeth Lavenza, and perhaps Justine Moritz) by their male protectors at different junctures. Through Safie, and leveraging



the stereotype of the cruel “Asiatic” or Muslim father, Shelley emphasises the vulnerability of women in particular to family estrangement and the forced displacements of marriage. Although *Frankenstein’s* women very often seem irritatingly passive, in the light of Safie’s story, they show themselves better able – even in exile – to construct and reconstruct critical familial and social bonds in the place of ruptured ties. More importantly still, Safie’s story of Mediterranean exile teaches the Creature the nature and vocabulary of his own displacement. Through her, he comes to recognise his own plight. Her arrival in the world of the poor cottagers, after all, very closely resembles his own entrance in the world without language. The Creature notes that “she was neither understood by, or herself understood, the cottagers” and yet he instinctively (and revealingly) understands their mutual courtesy and pleasure: “I saw that her presence diffused gladness through the cottage, dispelling their sorrow as the sun dissipates the morning mists” (78). These signs of hospitality and community contrast pointedly with the violence the Creature routinely meets.

- 31 As the cottagers begin to instruct Safie in their language (French), the Creature grasps the opportunity “to make use of the same instructions to the same end”, quickly outstripping the progress of his fellow pupil (79). If the cottage marks the Creature’s entrance into the social order (from and at its margins), Volney’s *Ruins of Empires* (1791), from which Felix instructs Safie, marks the Creature’s entrance into history and political order:

Through this work I obtained a cursory knowledge of history, and a view of the several empires at present existing in the world; it gave me an insight into the manners, governments, and religions of the different nations of the earth. I heard of the slothful Asiatics; of the stupendous genius and mental activity of the Grecians; of the wars and wonderful virtue of the early Romans – of their subsequent degeneration – of the decline of that mighty empire; of chivalry, Christianity, and kings. I heard of the discovery of the American hemisphere, and wept with Safie over the hapless fate of its original inhabitants. (80)

- 32 Via Safie’s lessons, the Creature is taught prejudice, social distinction, and “strange feelings” – that man could be “indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base” (80). At the same time, he discovers the more terrible truth of his own unique monstrosity:

[W]hat 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 of 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? (81)

- 33 Learning imperial history from the centres of Empire – Rome and Constantinople – the Creature discovers the power, and the “degeneration”, of the community of man. He learns of the violence of ambition, the “hapless fate” of indigenous peoples in the face of European trade and imperialism, and the truth of his own fundamental displacement outside this order: “I was not even of the same nature as man” (80).

- 34 Annotating the first chapter of the novel, Stuart Curran (2009) in the excellent *Romantic Circles* edition of *Frankenstein* notes that the “shadowy presence of Italy behind this narrative has not been explained”. As I have tried to show here, Italy functions as the “other pole” of Shelley’s Arctic “brink”: the narrative stretches between the Mediterranean Sea and Arctic Ocean in a distinctively Romantic imaginative geography of exile and displacement. Later in the same note, Curran recognises that “the presence of Italy does extend the geographical bounds of the pan-European setting to the south, just as the opening in Russia extends them far to the north”. But I want to suggest that the quiet presence of Italy as the place of Frankenstein’s birth, the origin of Elizabeth Lavenza, and the point of exile and escape for Safie marks more than a simple expansion of boundaries. Italy, specifically the Mediterranean, lurks as the other “sea” of the novel’s geographic imaginary. It is conceived (largely in loss and absentia) as the



civil, familial, even pre-lapsarian heart of the novel, where Victor Frankenstein is most aligned and ensconced within his family, and where the orphan Elizabeth is taken in. Frankenstein's personal disintegration, and the fracturing of filial and social bonds that his rejection of the creature constitutes, is thus represented by a series of exiles from south to north and through increasingly extreme landscapes. Significantly, *Frankenstein* does not measure dislocation and social displacement from West to East, so much as from South to North: the restless physical movement of the novel is mapped onto a mythic and maritime structure to produce a distinctive British and Romantic topography of alienation and disintegration.

- 35 At least part of the distinctive imaginative geography of the novel can be explained by Shelley's own itinerance at this period. Even a cursory glance at Shelley's journal between 1814 and 1818 shows the couple's almost continuous movement between England and the Continent – and within both – during this time. Mary and Percy's shared journal book is begun in July 1814, the time of their elopement from London to the Continent in open defiance of Mary's father William Godwin and Percy's existing marriage. Alongside the lists, scribbles, and sums, Percy records in this notebook Mary's first Channel crossing in the face of a storm – in terms which foreshadow the extreme experiences and reflective tenor of her later novel:

We were proceeding slowly against the wind when suddenly a thunder squall struck the sail & waves rushed into the boat. Even the sailors perceived that our situation was perilous, they succeeded [in] reefing the sail – the wind had now changed & [w]e drove before a wind that came in violent gusts directly to Calais. Mary did not know our danger. She was resting between my knees that were unable to support her. She did not speak or look, but I felt that she was there. I had time in that moment to reflect & even reason upon death. It was rather a thing of discomfort & of disappointment than [?terror] to me. (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert 1987, 7)

- 36 Together with Mary's step-sister Claire Clairmont, the couple made their way from Calais through France: toiling through country scarred by recent heavy fighting as troops marched from Switzerland on Napoleonic Paris; and limping in a reverse direction from dirty inn to dirty inn – first through France and Switzerland, and then Germany (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert 1987, 12n). Their great escape to Europe is disappointing and short-lived. Close to destitute after only six weeks, they returned via the Rhine to England in equally inauspicious circumstances: the journal records that “the sea is horribly tempestuous & Mary horridly sick nor is Shelley much better” (24). The Shelleys retraced these steps in much the same way, although in slightly more hopeful terms, almost exactly two years later when they return to the Continent in the summer of 1816 to take up residence near Lord Byron's Villa Diodati. Here the famous ghost story competition among friends takes place, and Shelley's dream-vision of the novel occurs (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert 1987, 12n). Much of the Continental material of *Frankenstein* is clearly taken from the Shelley's travel journals: their impressions of and responses to Alpine landscape – particularly in the valley of Chamonix and upon *le Mer de Glace*, which the Shelleys visited in July 1816 – find their way directly from journal to novel. Throughout the novel's composition, the Shelleys had continuously considered possible countries of residence, and indeed did move to Italy shortly after *Frankenstein*'s publication, suggesting another context for the “shadowy presence” of Italy.

- 37 But a less obvious background of personal dislocation also haunts the novel: in between these periods of continental exile, made for reasons of financial stress and to avoid unwelcome social scrutiny, Mary suffered perhaps a more devastating “internal displacement”. Estranged from her adored father who refused to meet with her after her elopement with Shelley, bearing and losing children, Mary Shelley's many residences revolved around London (Pancras, Blackfriars Road, Pimlico, and Bishopsgate), the south coast, and Bath. During this itinerant period the couple are very frequently not even together, as Percy avoids his creditors by writing in clubs and taverns, and sleeping at the homes of friends. Too often it seems, between “work”, “walk”, and “read”, the



diary is punctuated with the record “pack” and “move”: Mary Shelley being almost always the one who collects the family’s belongings together and superintends the shift to their next location.

38 In this painful period of estrangement from her father – whom she continued to read and write to, and whose home in Skinner Street North London was often only a short walk away – Mary Shelley must have felt a peculiar sense of intimate exile. Although she never criticises him in either journal or letters, her sense of abandonment, even betrayal by William Godwin, is palpable. Honouring the radical sexual politics of her parents, both of whom in their own writing had advocated overthrowing marriage for a different model of passionate friendship and equitable attachment, in choosing her own partner on these terms, Shelley was instead pushed away by her father. Even as Godwin steadfastly refused to see his daughter, he continued to demand financial support from his son-in-law, the prospective heir to a large estate. Mary Shelley’s social and familial dislocation at this period, perhaps the most painful form of exile, are echoed in those displacements suffered by the novel’s women, and Frankenstein’s cruel repudiation of his creature-child on Mont Blanc: “I will not hear you. There can be no community between you and me” (66).

4. Conclusion: configuring displacement

39 *Frankenstein* is a novel preoccupied and saturated with various forms of displacement. One thing that almost every character shares, and which effectively redoubles the intensity of that shared experience through its repeated relations, is a personal understanding of movement, dislocation, or exile. These displacements take various forms. Women (Caroline Beaufort, Elizabeth Lavenza, and Safie) are forced from home and the protection of family by male pride or ambition – in every case a father’s. Men (Walton and Frankenstein, Felix, and arguably the elder Beaufort and the Turkish merchant) are forced into forms of national or international exile by ambition, politics, or principle. For Clerval and Felix, exile is caused by friendship, repaid in betrayal or violence. These displacements are mapped geographically by the novel’s narrative movement within Europe, through Britain, and north to the Arctic Circle, and in terms of the possibilities and failures of sympathetic exchange transcribed by its events.

40 Although all *Frankenstein*’s characters – even minor ones – seem to suffer some form of dislocation in the course of their lives, the terrible state of displacement and existential exile is configured most powerfully in the form of Frankenstein’s Creature. His physical “nature” of dismemberment – his composition of parts both human and animal, and his monstrous appearance – provoke and symbolise his exclusion from the body politic. That the Creature is a deliberate metaphor and philosophical thought experiment, testing the limits of the human and human sympathy, is made clearest in the Preface to the first 1818 edition. Here Percy Shelley (posing as the author) explicitly declares the novel’s experimental intentions, and in highly suggestive terms. Anticipating reader objections to the novel’s central premise of restoring human life, Shelley contends that this is far from “a mere tale of spectres or enchantment”. He insists instead that “however impossible as a physical fact”, the novel’s animation of the Being “affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield” (5).

41 The Creature is monstrous because he is prodigiously *unhuman*; “impossible as a physical fact” because literally created of disparate parts that cross species’ distinctions, and formed outside contemporary canons of knowledge. His absolute otherness is simultaneously configured in the recognisable and human terms of eighteenth-century race and exoticism: physical difference; blackness; yellowness; coarseness; primitivism; lack or loss of language. The corpse that Shelley animates is this figuration of difference – a multi-dimensional otherness that has resonated (and continues to resonate) across



multiple fields of race, class, ethnicity, and disability. But which “human passions” are the focus of the novel’s interest? Previous readings have focused, understandably, on the ambition or hubris of the scientist and natural philosopher. Others have foregrounded the anxious exploration of birth, creation, and (non-existent) mothering in the novel. One of the most extraordinary powers of the Creature is his ability to move in this way across fields of meaning, like a cypher, or generative symbol, accruing significance with each new reading, translation, or adaptation.

42 In tracing *Frankenstein’s* detailed imaginative geographies, from Mediterranean Europe, via Mont Blanc, to the Arctic Circle, and focusing on the Creature’s incorporation of alienation and difference, my goal has been to redraw attention to the wider dynamics of mobility and displacement that the novel inherits and describes in the Romantic period. On one level the novel’s preoccupation with movement, exile and displacement is highly self-conscious. The narrative’s continuous movement directly reflects the post-Waterloo moving human landscape of displaced persons, demobbed soldiers, emancipated slaves, traders, sailors, émigrés, and curious travellers that circulated across the turn of the nineteenth century. This conspicuous restiveness is only amplified by the events of 1816, the “Year without a Summer” and the year the novel was largely composed, when climate refugees moved throughout Europe looking for food and shelter in the aftermath of the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia. Frankenstein and the Creature’s widening movements between Europe and the British Isles, and then north to the *mare incognitum* beyond the Arctic Circle, directly echo the violent displacements of over two decades of global and imperial warfare centred in Europe. This is, in many ways, the novel’s most conspicuous Romantic inheritance: it reconfigures a period of revolutionary instability deeply internalised in a literature of emplacement and self-alienation.

43 For Britons this is inevitably located, at least partially – and certainly imaginatively – in Europe. The novel preserves a sense of this remoteness or physical dislocation, especially for Britons, where the war was almost always taking place elsewhere (Favret 2009). But it also reflects the very real divisions and political displacements the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars created *within* Britain – those Britons who faced exclusion or self-division as the revolution unfolded and opinions changed. But *Frankenstein* also, I want to argue, reconfigures a very personal and much less self-conscious reality of internal displacement and familial dislocation: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s estrangement from her father, caused by her choice of Percy Shelley and a writing life. Her life is reflected, as many readers have noticed, in the motherless child that is Frankenstein’s Creature; perhaps her fractured relationship with her father William Godwin is similarly wrought in the cruel relationship between Frankenstein and his Creature.

44 Romantic literary historiography implicitly recognises the thematic of displacement in the period, but does not, as yet, consider it in those terms, or in any systematic or sustained way. Previous discussion is more inclined to consider questions of exile, against a backdrop of Romantic ideals of nationalism or cosmopolitanism. Shelley’s *Frankenstein* demonstrates that there is another, more complex and more nuanced, way of considering human movement during the Romantic period, and that a rich historical vocabulary for Romantic displacement already exists: it has been there all the time.

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1 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818), ed. J. Paul Hunter, 11. All further references to *Frankenstein*, unless otherwise stated, will be made to this text, and cited parenthetically by page number.

2 The references to albatrosses and “land[s] of mist and snow” direct knowing readers to Samuel Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1817).

3 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831), Maurice Hindle (ed), 19. Further references to the 1831 *Frankenstein* will be to this edition, and cited parenthetically in the text, preceded by the year of publication (1831).

4 The Shelleys read Barruel’s *Mémoires...* (1797-98) more than once in the years 1814 and 1815. See Clairmont (1968, 35), Holmes (1974, 242-243, 261), Mellor (1988, 82), Seymour (2000, 111 and 111n).

5 Changes between the first (1818) and revised third edition (1831) elaborate Frankenstein’s growing isolation in this scene. In the first edition, he travels with his family to the Valley of Chamonix, but makes the climb alone. In the third edition, however, wracked by guilt he abandons his family and Geneva simultaneously. The revision amplifies Victor’s self-absorption and moral responsibility for the fracturing of critical bonds.

Para citar este artigo

Referência do documento impresso

Katrina O’Loughlin, «The Pathless Seas: Configuring Displacement in British Romanticism », *Ler História*, 78 | 2021, 85-107.

Referência eletrônica

Katrina O’Loughlin, «The Pathless Seas: Configuring Displacement in British Romanticism », *Ler História* [Online], 78 | 2021, posto online no dia 23 junho 2021, consultado no dia 06 fevereiro 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lerhistoria/8328>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/lerhistoria.8328>

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