

“What Freedom?”:
Frankenstein,
Anti-Occidentalism,
and English Liberty

JOHN OWEN HAVARD

LIONEL Verney, the eponymous “last man” of Mary Shelley’s 1826 novel, commences his story from a geographically remote location:

I am the native of a sea-surrounded nook, a cloud-enshadowed land, which, when the surface of the globe, with its shoreless ocean and trackless continents, presents itself to my mind, appears only as an inconsiderable speck in the immense whole; and yet, when balanced in the scale of mental power, far outweighed countries of larger extent and more numerous population. So true it is, that man’s mind alone was the creator of all that was good or great to man, and that Nature herself was only his first minister. England, seated far north in the turbid sea, now visits my dreams in the semblance of a vast and well-manned ship, which mastered the winds and rode proudly over the waves. In my boyish days she was the universe to me. When I stood on my native hills, and saw plain and mountain stretch out to the utmost limits of my vision, speckled by the dwellings of my countrymen, and subdued to fertility by their labours, the earth’s very

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centre was fixed for me in that spot, and the rest of her orb was as a fable, to have forgotten which would have cost neither my imagination nor understanding an effort.¹

England, the center of the world in happier times, continues to rule the waves of Verney's subconscious life, visiting his dreams as "a vast and well-manned ship." Yet the resurfacing of Anglo-centric pride in *The Last Man* also marks the end of that nation as such—indeed of all nations, whatsoever. The plague that befalls the global population in Shelley's end-of-mankind novel leaves the institutions of Verney's home nation hollowed out and its lands abandoned; the anchoring global role assumed by England, moreover, has been replaced here by an island nation of one, whose inconsiderable scale and lone inhabitant count in "the scale of mental power" for the entire world.

Victor Frankenstein concludes his story in similarly profound isolation. As he reflects upon the destruction of his creature in the final volume of *Frankenstein* (1818), Victor describes his abject state in terms of a wider condition. "If he were vanquished," he reasons, "I should be a free man." But he goes on: "Alas! what freedom? such as the peasant enjoys when his family have been massacred before his eyes, his cottage burnt, his lands laid waste, and he is turned adrift, homeless, penniless, and alone, but free."² Victor's circumstances approximate the deracinated subject of an emergent economic liberalism, a version of the "freedom" of mobilization that came into focus between John Bunyan and William Wordsworth.³ They look ahead, too, to the isolated condition of Verney in *The Last Man*, as well as to other destitute and shipwrecked heroes. Yet the ironic "freedom" described here carries an

¹ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, ed. Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook, vol. 4 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley* (London: Pickering, 1996), p. 11.

² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, ed. Nora Crook, vol. 1 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley* (London: Pickering, 1996), p. 145. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

³ See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008), pp. 222–25; Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and His Church, 1628–1688* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); and Celeste Langan, *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).

added charge, I propose, which Victor underscores in concluding this account of his ravaged condition: "Such would be my liberty" (*Frankenstein*, p. 145). Victor's freedom, no less than Verney's island, becomes an ironic double of an English ideal. No less than in *The Last Man*, moreover, this oblique commentary on English exceptionalism takes shape in a global frame. In what follows, I show how *Frankenstein* circles in upon this critique of English liberty, thereby glancing toward a wider critique of the West as the presumed home for "freedom." This discussion entails renewed attention to the novel's decentered Western geographies and globe-trotting scope. Locating Victor's concluding appeal to his "free" condition within the novel's geographically expansive plotting amplifies the political stakes of his downfall and of the wider trail of destruction left in his wake. At the same time, reexamining the novel's geography in tandem with its use of form (particularly the tragic form that Shelley's novel shares with such precursors as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* [1747–48]) allows us to rethink the overarching narrative design of *Frankenstein* in ways that disrupt, if not more radically dislocate, existing ways of thinking about Shelley's novel and its political itineraries.

Frankenstein's European settings and the French Revolution have provided important frameworks for reading the novel in political terms, as have developments associated with the transition into the nineteenth century and Western modernity as such. Diana Reese argues that *Frankenstein* witnesses "the instantiation of a critical dilemma for attributions of the human proceeding from Enlightenment," contending that Victor Frankenstein's creation "travers[es] the slash between man/citizen, reasoner/human, general/individual will," and poses "a delicate challenge to the work of reason in Enlightenment projects for a new authorization of law."⁴ The related

⁴ Diana Reese, "A Troubled Legacy: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the Inheritance of Human Rights," *Representations*, no. 96 (2006), 48, 49. The monster in Reese's account occupies a paradoxical position: instantiating the rational Kantian subject while also embodying an empirical remainder, comprising both the general will of an unformed population and a particular interest not assimilable into the national whole. I am more concerned here with legal-political conceptions of liberty that circumscribe individual subjects within claims of proprietorial subjecthood (with related consequences at the level of the polity to those Reese identifies). Rather than attending to

emergence of the working “masses,” in tandem with the ascent of capitalism, has provided a similarly important critical framework for reading *Frankenstein*.⁵ Critics have also drawn more direct lines of connection with the revolution in France. Julia V. Douthwaite notes that efforts post-1789 to “make a ‘new man’ and a new nation have long been a central lens for viewing” *Frankenstein*, while Fred V. Randel proposes that Shelley accepts the “metaphoric equivalence between the French Revolution and [the] monster.”⁶ In the most elaborate existing discussion of the novel’s geography, Randel even sees “the creature’s trajectory from birth in Ingolstadt to death by fire, amidst Northern ice” like one of Napoleon’s soldiers, providing “a figure for the history of the French Revolution” (“The Political Geography of Horror,” p. 469).

The trail of destruction that follows from Victor’s act of creation resonates, in these readings, with the calamities of recent European history. We may further amplify these resonances in noting that Shelley may have drawn upon a scene of post-Napoleonic destruction that she had witnessed firsthand in her description of the “peasant” with whom Victor compares his derelict, “free” condition (*Frankenstein*, p. 145n). But while sympathetic with these discussions, I adopt in this essay a pointedly different approach to the critique of emergent Western master narratives in Shelley’s novel. While pertinent to my wider argument, neither the tarnished *Liberté* of the French

the peculiar human/nonhuman status of the monster, I focus instead here on the ways Victor Frankenstein intersects with variously conceived formulations and locations of “freedom.”

⁵ Franco Moretti sees Shelley’s novel anticipating capitalist exploitation, with the race of demons promised by allowing the monster’s “race” to propagate figuring the proletariat (see Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller [London: Verso, 1983]).

⁶ Julia V. Douthwaite with Daniel Richter, “The Frankenstein of the French Revolution: Nogaret’s Automaton Tale of 1790,” *European Romantic Review*, 20 (2009), 381; Fred V. Randel, “The Political Geography of Horror in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,” *ELH*, 70 (2003), 467. Other accounts of the novel that emphasize its revolutionary contexts and afterlives include Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution, 1789–1820* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983); and Lee Sterrenburg, “Mary Shelley’s Monster: Politics and Psyche in *Frankenstein*,” in *The Endurance of “Frankenstein”: Essays on Mary Shelley’s Novel*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1974), pp. 143–71.

Revolution nor the ascent of economic liberalism and “free market” thinking adequately captures the sharp critical edge behind Shelley’s account of Victor’s ravaged condition. That “freedom,” I argue, carried added baggage. In what follows, I show how Shelley insinuated a wider critique into the development of Victor’s very personal catastrophe. That critique comes into focus during the critically neglected excursion to the British isles that precedes the account of his “free” condition, before reaching its apotheosis with his subsequent disappearance, following glances toward the supposedly vacant Americas, into the North Pole. In this essay I excavate the presence of a specifically English (and to some degree Anglo-American) history of “liberty” within *Frankenstein* and point to its implications for evolving conceptions of Western freedom during Shelley’s early-nineteenth-century moment.

The critique that emerges over the course of *Frankenstein* was, I argue, at once more tightly specific and more wide reaching in its implications than established ways of reading the novel in political terms have appreciated. It was also tightly bound up with the novel’s galloping plot. The account I develop here proceeds, in part, by way of renewed attention to the unfolding structure and narrative mechanics of *Frankenstein*, whose formal sophistication has been obscured by the generalizations of existing readings. The various approaches to the novel pursued here—geographical, legal-political, and formal—prove inseparable, I hope to demonstrate, from each other. They converge, no less than in *The Last Man*, around a wider concern with the divide between East and West.⁷ While my focus here falls on England, the decentered presence of the nation of Shelley’s birth in *Frankenstein* may stand, by synecdoche, for alienation from Europe more broadly—alienation that prompted Frankenstein’s monster, like Byron and other members of Shelley’s circle, to contemplate an escape to South

⁷ As critics have shown, East-West divides subtend the emergence of the plague that overtakes Europe and destroys mankind in *The Last Man*, from the continuing battle over Constantinople to the mysterious events associated with Asia. See Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud, *Radical Orientalism: Rights, Reform, and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015); and Barbara Johnson, *A Life with Mary Shelley* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2014).

America. As the novel ultimately reveals, however, even these last-ditch hopes of escaping an exhausted Europe for the still-further-West remained bound up with the same destructive logics Shelley had lodged in the home continent. The pursuits of the “freedom” represented by the Americas, that is to say, were of a piece with—even the logical fulfillment of—the hollowed-out freedoms and precarious social bonds that overshadowed the long nineteenth century in Britain and that continue to haunt our own neoliberal present.⁸



In *Enlightenment Orientalism* (2011), Srinivas Aravamudan sought to displace the “rise of the novel” narrative from its pillar-like status by turning the focus instead on a heterogeneous strain of late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century fiction that called the very premise of the “English” novel radically into question. In reading such works as the myriad derivatives and adaptations of Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* (1721) and the proliferating narratives of the

⁸ This essay joins with a still emerging revisionist history of freedom that sees restraint, coercion, violence, and precarity not as external to but coextensive with emerging freedoms in the hegemonic Anglo-American and Euro-colonial contexts. See, *inter alia*, Orlando Patterson, *Freedom: Volume I: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (London: I. B. Taurus, 1991); Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600–1850* (London: J. Cape, 2002); Christopher Tomlins, *Freedom Bound: Law, Labor, and Civic Identity in Colonizing English America, 1580–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010); Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1975); and David Kazanjian, *The Brink of Freedom: Improvising Life in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2016). Reese views the monster’s projected escape to South America as a sardonic allusion to “natural man”: a state both prior to history and on the vanguard of a mythical futurity, which may, I propose, be incorporated as an exception within the logics of European freedom that concern me here (see Reese, “A Troubled Legacy,” p. 61). As Jessie Reeder has shown, South America was beginning to appear in British political-economic thought in its own right as a vast, readily colonizable waste land. Even the Arctic is more populous than South America in *Frankenstein*, Reeder notes, looking ahead to depictions of Latin America in nineteenth-century British fiction “as either empty or unrepresentable” (Jessie Reeder, *The Forms of Informal Empire: Britain, Latin America, and Nineteenth-Century Literature* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2020]). Emergent appeals to “freedom” on the part of Latin Americans themselves were inextricable, Reeder demonstrates, from the continued repression and constraint associated with the paradoxical condition of “informal empire.”

Arabian Nights, audiences were able, Aravamudan proposed, to cultivate an enlightened appreciation of cultural difference. These fictional productions accordingly worked to undermine the foundations of a stable East-West divide and the premise of an autochthonous English identity, both of which were, Aravamudan maintained, promulgated and reinforced by “rise of the novel” narratives. Dramatic increases in British imperial power—in tandem with developments in the novel and national tale—made for an altogether different situation at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁹ Yet Aravamudan’s model remains helpful on at least two counts: it allows us to displace or at least unsettle accounts of triumphant nationalism (in particular, their implication with fantasies of “domestic authenticity”); and it locates “England” within a complexly interstitial, radically decentered space. Attending closely to the intricate geography of *Frankenstein* with a view, in the first instance, to relations between East and West begins to reveal the values and practices of the Occident—exemplified for my purposes here by England and to some extent the wider European Atlantic world—as to some degree already relativized, uncertain, and foreign to themselves.

Frankenstein famously comprises a series of concentric narratives, routinely described as its “Chinese box” structure (and broadly analogous, in this respect, to the framed tales of the *Arabian Nights*). At the core of this nested story is the creature’s observation, through a barred window, of a family of humble cottagers from whom he learns the value of family and rational conversation. As critics have noted, the scene places the desire for domestic comfort, if not the bourgeois familial ideal, at the core and metaphorical heart of the novel.¹⁰ Whether seen as the result of a gendered breakdown in sympathy and nurturing parental love or as a claim concerning the ways “society” creates its own outcasts and thereby inculcates its own

⁹ See Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012), pp. 3, 9. Compare Saree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998).

¹⁰ See Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Methuen, 1988), p. 119.

violence, the monster's exclusion from this domestic scene helps explain his subsequent vengeance. Immediate political resonances also suggest themselves. Julia Douthwaite notes a parallel between "the chronological movement" of the French Revolution and "the narrative movement in *Frankenstein*—from an initial moment of optimism lived in a rural idyll, into an epic of suffering in which the oppressed turns into the oppressor"—and points to the ways the monster's blissful coexistence with the De Lacey's "bespeaks nostalgia for the lost possibility of creating a new polis" ("The Frankenstein of the French Revolution," pp. 384, 385). The 1790s may well infuse the "atmosphere" here, instilling this idyll with revolutionary optimism. Yet Shelley, I contend, equally undermines and displaces the logic on which that reading depends. When we consider the novel's oblique, decentered approach to geography, Western freedoms and Eurocentric ideals appear already fractured and compromised from within. That much becomes apparent when we recall that the monster's account of the De Lacey's, itself already at various removes from the novel's outermost "frame" of narration, contains a further digression to the East.

The cottagers, a family who lived in Paris until they were dispelled by events related to the French Revolution, include a further expatriate, Safie, whose story is worth recalling at some length:

"Safie related, that her mother was a Christian Arab, seized and made a slave by the Turks; recommended by her beauty, she had won the heart of the father of Safie, who married her. The young girl spoke in high and enthusiastic terms of her mother, who, born in freedom spurned the bondage to which she was now reduced. She instructed her daughter in the tenets of her religion, and taught her to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit, forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet. This lady died; but her lessons were indelibly impressed on the mind of Safie, who sickened at the prospect of again returning to Asia, and the being immured within the walls of a haram, allowed only to occupy herself with puerile amusements, ill suited to the temper of her soul, now accustomed to grand ideas and a noble emulation for virtue.

The prospect of marrying a Christian, and remaining in a country where women were allowed to take a rank in society, was enchanting" (*Frankenstein*, p. 92).

Without question, an ideal of community, anchored in a European domestic space, appears at the core of *Frankenstein*. Yet at the novel's center, as this further digression from that hearth reveals, was not only the home, but also the harem. The writings of Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, help to explain the inclusion of this detail. In addition to arguing that the sheltered condition of women made them insipid and puerile, Wollstonecraft explicitly critiqued the "Mahometanism" that repressed women and the practices that made them "weak beings . . . only fit for a seraglio."¹¹ This episode in *Frankenstein* may thereby appear to recapitulate Wollstonecraft's thinking. But complications quickly emerge. For all their latent xenophobia, Wollstonecraft's remarks described a dynamic "operating in the West as much if not more so than in the East."¹² They belong to Wollstonecraft's critique of misogyny and gendered power, in a version of what Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud has termed the rhetoric of "Radical Orientalism." There are also formal questions at stake here. Established approaches to reading the Safie digression typically explain (and contain) its implications through appeals to *Frankenstein's* "Chinese box" structure. Read as the counterpart to *Frankenstein's* expansive geography, whereby the progressive depths reached by the novel's nested tales mirror the journey outward of the frame narrator, Walton, to the North Pole, this outermost point in the novel's sequence of narrators might constitute its "inaccessible center," a voyage deep into the unknown (Zonana, "They Will Prove the Truth of My Tale," p. 171). That structure can equally be read in the opposite terms, however, such that this "innermost layer of the novel's concentric

¹¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, the Wollstonecraft Debate, Criticism*, ed. Carol H. Poston, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1988), pp. 8, 10.

¹² Joyce Zonana, "'They Will Prove the Truth of My Tale': Safie's Letters as the Feminist Core of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 21 (1991), 173. Zonana also quotes Wollstonecraft (p. 173).

narratives” presents a familiar domestic context.¹³ Despite the harem occupying “the point most geographically remote from the novel’s major axes of travel,” the reader, in Joseph Lew’s memorable phrasing, thus “peel[s] back layer after narrative layer” only to find “the bourgeois nuclear family in Oriental drag” (“The Deceptive Other,” pp. 281, 282–83).

Recoding apparent difference as familiarity, this domesticating account nonetheless depends as much as the Orientalizing one on a stable sense of division, and—to the extent that they depend upon increasingly fixed tropes, however qualified and partially subverted—these are not so much alternative readings as different sides of the same coin. But it is their respective visions of “freedom” that concern us here. And in this respect, these readings loop back and forth, untidily, into each other. Following Aravamudan’s dual injunction to develop critical paradigms that do not embolden but instead challenge the stability of an East-West divide, and that do not assimilate all fiction worthy of attention to a familial-domestic archetype, we may instead approach this scene in terms that resist containment by either of these models while partaking of both possibilities. The restraint of the “haram,” after all, appears distant, yet its domestic confinement might also seem familiar; despotic tyranny appears as something foreign, but also close to home. Rather than a switch from East to West or an escape from tyranny to freedom, *Frankenstein* instead has us move from one scene of restraint, only then to enter another and still another. While Safie may escape from “Asia,” the West into which she arrives was far from providing a site of refuge (as will become clear from the unraveling of Victor’s “catastrophe”). Indeed, based on what the novel provides us to go by, the kinds of coercion and duress to which Safie was subject are not only present “here too,” but gravitate with particular charge to this Western location. By situating this digression within a reconfigured approach to the design and geography of Shelley’s novel, I propose, this interpolated narrative thus functions altogether differently within the design of

¹³ Joseph W. Lew, “The Deceptive Other: Mary Shelley’s Critique of Orientalism in *Frankenstein*,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 30 (1991), 281.

Frankenstein, dislodging Europe from its identification with a stabilized, domestic ideal and associations with freedom and dislocating the skeleton of the novel's ostensibly fixed structure.



Among the books that Shelley perused in the months of intensive reading that anticipated the composition of *Frankenstein* was a copy of the *Arabian Nights*, which she encountered in an expansive 1812 edition. The lengthy preface to these freshly repackaged “Tales of the East” lauds their “perfect insight into the private habits, the domestic comforts and deprivations of the orientals” and their “true and striking picture of the manners and customs prevalent amongst some of the most interesting nations on earth.”¹⁴ This 1812 introduction nonetheless calls attention to “the utter defiance of probability” by which their “catastrophe[s]” were accompanied (Weber, “Introduction,” pp. i, iii). The tales of Sinbad feature voyages within voyages to lands within lands, including experiences of being taken captive and surprisingly rescued. At one point, Sinbad delves into a charnel house, only to be magically recovered, only then to be sent on yet another voyage. The influence of these unfixed, ever-unfurling locations and serial, cyclical narrators on Anglophone novels can be felt most obviously elsewhere within the Gothic tradition, especially the non-English variants of Ireland and Scotland. The “Tales” nonetheless present a better analogue for the “frame” narrative of *Frankenstein* than the concentric circles and geometric boxes emphasized by existing critical discussions. My point here is neither to suggest influence nor to be phobic with respect to that possibility. Rather than presuming a stable domestic scene or a point of absolute alterity, relaxing more rigid conceptions

¹⁴ Henry Weber, “Introduction,” in *Tales of the East: Comprising the Most Popular Romances of Oriental Origin . . . To Which Is Prefixed an Introductory Dissertation*, ed. Weber (Edinburgh: J. Ballantyne and Co., 1812), p. ii. As he sinks into the obsessive studies during the early phases of the novel, Victor compares his experience directly to that of Sinbad in the *Arabian Nights*: “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” (*Frankenstein*, p. 36). While Sinbad finds himself able to resurface afresh, however, Victor has no such good fortune.

of *Frankenstein's* nested or "Chinese box" structure allows us to locate the harem scene in relation to the recursive, endlessly unfurling narration of tales that leave the prospects of a return "home" or an escape to the outside always relativized and uncertain. That collapse between home and abroad and the confusion between familiar and other becomes all the more apparent when we follow the course taken by the novel's concerns with freedom.

In sharp contrast with the interconnected narratives and multiple "catastrophes" of the *Arabian Nights*, Shelley drew what Victor describes as his "connected" narrative toward a single, ineluctable "catastrophe" (*Frankenstein*, pp. 152, 166). The course of that narrative coincides with the geographical itinerary that carries him to England and that in turn opens up the book's geography to the Americas. We thereby come up against a multifaceted reversal. Where the *Arabian Nights* had located the constraints of the harem and associated repression and imprisonment within a constantly shifting, fluid, and decentered narrative space, Shelley locates Victor within the imprisoning consequences of a particular chain of narrative developments whose locus remains emphatically Western. The point is not straightforwardly ironic, in locating his personal imprisonment amid scenes of supposed political liberty. Rather than providing Victor with the assumed freedoms that adhere to the Occidental arena, his travels through the British isles and the novel's imagined voyages into the wider Anglo-American arena occasion constraints—paradoxically, given the historical identification of these locations as lands of liberty—that become as inescapable as his own tragedy. The reference to the tyranny of the East, in the "haram" digression, appears in Shelley's novel, I have proposed, as a moment of mobile and unfixed significance. By proceeding now to address *Frankenstein* more widely and examining how Shelley tightened the narrative screws even as she redirected the novel's geographical scope, we can see how she in turn shaped these dislocated binaries in a more deliberate fashion to bring home a pointed critique of the West and its freedoms. While Safie eludes the harem, that is to say, whether Victor Frankenstein and the novel that bears his name escape

from the imprisoning logics of “freedom” remains another question entirely.

Victor’s excursions through and beyond the British isles, which will concern the remainder of my discussion, provide the locus for Shelley’s sharpest formulations of this critique, but some attention to the wider European context of *Frankenstein* will help to bring out its full resonance. As I noted at the outset of this essay, the European settings of *Frankenstein* infuse its early phases with an idyllic atmosphere suggestive of unrealized political ideals, if not the frisson of revolution. That connection proves sharply ironic given that the novel progressively spirals into chaos and destruction (or altogether fitting, given the ways that Victor Frankenstein’s act of creation may echo the French Revolution and its monstrous afterlives). The emergence of England and the wider Atlantic as a vector of the novel’s concern was coextensive, I would suggest, with this oblique commentary on Europe. *Frankenstein’s* critique of English liberty, that is to say, belongs to a wider critique of European freedom with various strands, and decentering England in the novel thus partakes of the wider aim of provincializing, as a means of criticizing, Europe.¹⁵ Attending to the destructive paths taken by Victor’s “catastrophe” and to the closely interrelated course taken by his vengeful creation brings out a specific—tragic—trajectory that carries the novel to England. That excursion takes shape in the novel as a whole against a backdrop of what we may, in broad strokes, deem *Frankenstein’s* Occidentalism, even as the novel subjects the supposed foundations of that category to criticism, fracturing its supposed unity into a collection of disparate geographies bound by contingent, faulty appeals to freedom, reason, and so forth.¹⁶

¹⁵ The Whiggish cast taken by appeals to the European setting may be glimpsed in Randel’s assertion that even the murder of Victor Frankenstein’s brother William “is seen through a largely Rousseauvian lens” (“The Political Geography of Horror,” p. 471). Assuming that Shelley does indeed mean to invoke these potent recent political histories, this gruesome event provides a strange endorsement.

¹⁶ For the emergent parameters of “Occidentalism” between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, see Akeel Bilgrami, “Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment,” *Critical Inquiry*, 32 (2006), 381–411; and Saree Makdisi, *Making England Western: Occidentalism, Race, and Imperial Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014). Although the English began to think of themselves as

The excursion to England has, in the first instance, a formal dimension. With the shift into the later volumes of Shelley's novel comes a considerable upping of the narrative *ante*. As Percy Shelley noted, *Frankenstein* was a page-turner. In a posthumously published review of the novel, the poet proclaimed:

The interest gradually accumulates and advances towards the conclusion with the accelerated rapidity of a rock rolled down a mountain. We are led breathless with suspense and sympathy, and the heaping up of incident on incident, and the working of passion out of passion. We cry "hold, hold! enough!"—but there is yet something to come.¹⁷

The novel makes this dense concatenation of events explicit in having Walton remark upon the "connected" nature of Victor's story as evidence of its veracity. The "heaping up of incident on incident" noted by Percy Shelley (together with the inexorable pull he ascribed to the narrative) fuels the escalating despair to which Victor Frankenstein succumbs. Rather than the disconnected worlds of the *Arabian Nights*, Victor finds himself in the confines of a novel governed by a realist chronotope and within a story progressively governed by a sense of tragic inevitability. The execution of an innocent servant girl for the murder of young William Frankenstein sees Victor lament that the actual killer—the monster—"walks about the world free"; Victor goes on, however, to identify himself as Justine's "true murderer" (*Frankenstein*, p. 69). As this self-description makes clear, Victor's plight becomes infused with a version of the "tragic responsibility" that Sandra

"somehow Western in the sense in which that term is often used today" at the turn of the nineteenth century, Makdisi emphasizes (*Making England Western*, p. 3), the idea of the "West" as such was only named later by Rudyard Kipling (see Makdisi, *Making England Western*, p. 247, n. 8). Bilgrami notes that critiques of "Occidentalism" originated from within the West (see "Occidentalism," p. 385). While *Frankenstein* may enclose a parallel critique of "scientific rationality"—paired with "democracy," Bilgrami notes, as "the defining essence of the West" ("Occidentalism," p. 384)—Shelley was apparently more sympathetic with the changing social and spatial imaginaries that Makdisi identifies with Westernization. Claire Clairmont recounts the Shelleys noting "it was so difficult to persuade the poor to be clean" (Claire Clairmont, journal, 14–22 August 1814, in *Shelley and His Circle, 1773–1822, Volume 3*, ed. Kenneth Neill Cameron [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970], p. 347).

¹⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley, "On 'Frankenstein,'" *Athenæum*, 1832, p. 730.

Macpherson has shown subtending accounts of personhood in the early English novel. Much like Richardson's *Clarissa*, *Frankenstein* similarly entombs its titular protagonist within a calamitous sequence of events, which are unintentionally of his own making, and holds him responsible (if not directly to blame) for their destructive consequences.¹⁸

Among the "something to come" in the novel's final volume was a series of surprising voyages. The third volume of *Frankenstein* begins with Victor leaving his future wife on the European mainland for London and Oxford. Proceeding to the remote coast of Scotland only to find himself pursued there by the monster, he sets out in a rowboat for England on his way back to the Continent. In a crucial and neglected episode, to which I will return, Victor lands inadvertently in Ireland, where the monster has once again anticipated him. In his remarks, Percy Shelley marked out this phase of the novel as derivative—the "one instance," he noted, "in which we detect the least approach to imitation"—but went on to observe that "the general character of the tale, indeed, resembles nothing that ever preceded it" ("On 'Frankenstein,'" p. 730). Reprising his natural metaphors, Shelley noted that, with the subsequent death of Victor's bride, "the story, like a stream which grows at once more rapid and profound as it proceeds, assumes an irresistible solemnity, and the magnificent energy and swiftness of a tempest" ("On 'Frankenstein,'" p. 730). Despite Shelley's remarks underscoring its out-of-place character, Victor's arrival in Ireland and his excursion to Britain more widely ought to give us pause. This last-minute swerve to locations familiar to an English readership and laden with significance for the Shelleys themselves, yet seemingly tangential to the core European

¹⁸ Mary Shelley read the final volumes of Richardson's novel in the period leading up to writing her own novel. See *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–1844*, ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), I, 136. Rather than any direct correspondence between these works, the tragic form that *Frankenstein* shares with *Clarissa* helps to reveal an increasingly tight bind between Victor's circumstances and his liability, however disavowed, for the actions of the monster. For the distinction between "responsibility" and "blame" and the logic of harm subtending existing accounts of liberal personhood as illuminated by the early English novel, see Sandra Macpherson, *Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010).

setting of the novel, did not witness its young author running out of ideas (as Percy Shelley suggested) but was, I propose, a pointed and deliberate addition to *Frankenstein's* geographical sweep and tragic narrative design, whose implications become apparent when we return to view the critical concern that attends this developing geographical vector of Shelley's novel: that of freedom.

In his *Letters on England* (1731), Voltaire lauded English institutions with a view to critiquing their French counterparts.¹⁹ But for all its legendary status as a "Land of Liberty" and the revolutionary credentials of such figures as Tom Paine, Joseph Priestley, and William Godwin (not to mention Mary Wollstonecraft), England became perhaps better known in the wake of the French Revolution for oppression. Byron alluded to recent repressive measures in his poem *Beppo* (1817) when he noted that the English liked "Habeas Corpus" but only "when we've got it" (alluding to the recent suspensions of legal protections and wider "Tory" turn).²⁰ Demands for increased political representation in the wake of the French Revolution coincided with further repressive measures. Victor's stay in Britain may accordingly place "special emphasis on the role of the author's country in the development—and retardation—of modern revolutionary thought and practice" (Randel, "The Political Geography of Horror," p. 476). Located within *Frankenstein's* larger narrative design, however, the implications of the voyage to England, I will show, prove still more equivocal and double-edged. We do not need to decide, I am suggesting, whether England remained a land of liberty or had witnessed its historic freedom dissolve into tyranny. By depicting England as a site in which oppressive rule and the legacies of "freedom" persisted in something like an equal and opposite relationship, Shelley resisted the teleological, Whiggish tendency to measure "freedom" according a single sliding scale, along which recent events had moved the respective countries of Europe. By instead calling attention to the ways liberty and bondage,

¹⁹ See Randel, "The Political Geography of Horror," pp. 476–77.

²⁰ Lord Byron, *Beppo*, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–93), IV, 144, stanza 47.

repression, and constraint perpetually promised to loop back into one another, the excursion to England in *Frankenstein* cast an oblique, ironic eye on emerging appeals to freedom, I propose, which the culmination of Victor's tragedy in turn honed into a sharper critique.

We may pause here to reflect on the strangeness of the inclusion of England in *Frankenstein* in the first place. The excursion might appear a puzzling, even haphazard addition to a book about a Swiss-born, German-educated scientist. Alternatively, its relevance might seem to go without saying. (Was this not, after all, an "English" novel?) Rather than dismissing this episode as a digression, in the lofty fashion of Percy Shelley, or taking its relevance as self-evident, we can begin to develop a more convincing explanation—and to illuminate the blind spots that uncritically assume the significance or status granted to England—by attributing this moment with greater structural significance than has yet been the case. Novels by British authors frequently included travels within and beyond England, and authors from Tobias Smollett to Walter Scott placed the constituent nations of the British isles in critical relation to each other (a tradition already evident in Daniel Defoe's *Colonel Jack* [1722], whose hero travels between England and Scotland, before his inadvertent passage to Virginia, as an indentured servant). The device of having a fictional spectator arrive from outside the British polity altogether, as part of a narrative otherwise based elsewhere, was rather more unusual. The closest analogues for Victor's excursion from the preceding century come not from novels but from the familiar device of the foreign spectator at home. Represented by the Chinese and Spanish authors of Oliver Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1762) and Robert Southey's *Letters from England* (1807) but with precursors reaching back at least to Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's *Spectator* (1711–14), these works typically sought to lionize England in the guise of an admiring, non-English observer. Where works including the *Persian Letters* of Montesquieu had worked, as Aravamudan has shown, to destabilize the locus of home, this English tradition had the explicit goal of emphasizing the superiority of England's institutions—in particular, of English freedoms.

On his arrival, Victor concerns himself less with the religious tolerance and commercial prosperity typically emphasized in these foreign spectator accounts than with the diffusion of scientific knowledge, perhaps alluding to “the French Enlightenment’s indebtedness to English science and politics” (Randel, “The Political Geography of Horror,” p. 476). But even while potentially expanding the orbit of the European enlightenment beyond the German university at which Victor first acquired his arcane learning (and emphasizing the broader roots of the French *philosophes*), this excursion also highlights a further, competing, less-than-gleaming English history. Victor becomes preoccupied not with the beacons of English freedom that enthused Voltaire but with such symbols of royal power and repressive rule as the Tower of London, the notorious scene of state-sponsored torture that remained a working prison. Victor thus takes up some of the concerns with emblematic scenes of English freedom common from the foreign-observer-at-home tradition, only to pass them through a fractured lens. In Oxford, he spends his time lionizing the martyrs of the Civil Wars, including the followers of Charles I, noting that Oxford “had remained faithful to him, after the whole nation had forsaken his cause to join the standard of parliament and liberty” (*Frankenstein*, p. 123). At the same time, he also turns to heroes of anti-monarchical resistance. An encounter with the tomb of John Hampden, identified with defiance of absolutism, provides Victor with opportunities “to contemplate the divine ideas of liberty and self-sacrifice” (*Frankenstein*, p. 124)—a moment that Randel views as a defiant rejoinder to England’s mounting conservatism.²¹

In the wake of the French Revolution, the political significance of the scenes Victor encounters became starkly bifurcated: tradition skewed toward tyranny, while appeals to “liberty” and resistance inclined toward freedom and emancipation. The icons on which Victor focuses make England appear as much beacon of despotism as the home of freedom. Victor’s encounters with these English scenes and symbols, which juxtapose icons of resistance like Hampden with the Tower of

²¹ See Randel, “The Political Geography of Horror,” pp. 477–78.

London, thus cast them in ambiguous terms, as encounters with an English “liberty” whose tangled history remained bound up with sovereign rule and coercion. We do not need to ask whether England represents a “land of liberty” or a scene of repression in the novel: either designation remains liable to collapse into its supposed opposites. Byron exploited a similar irony when he had the Spanish hero of *Don Juan* (1819–24) welcome England upon his arrival as a “free” country, only to then have him held up at knifepoint. Victor nonetheless remains overshadowed by a very personal catastrophe. While he is able briefly “to shake off [his] chains” and to “look around . . . with a free and lofty spirit” when presented with Hampden and other icons of freedom, we learn that the “iron” of Victor’s memories and growing despair “had eaten into [his] flesh” (*Frankenstein*, p. 124). The relevance of the surrounding scenes and their equivocal legacies to his plight only deepens and becomes all the more apparent with a further shift of perspective, from Europe to the Anglo-American arena.

Victor’s melodramatic account of the “iron” chains eating into his flesh not only foreshadows the tragic downfall beginning to take shape by this point in the novel’s final volume, but it also gestures to the more pervasive forms of coercion and inverted freedom that subtend his personal catastrophe. The image of flesh-burning shackles had a deep history as a trope closely identified with the experience of African slaves (whose bondage the Shelleys protested). Aside from the realities of African chattel slavery, images of chains and bondage maintained a broader rhetorical appeal for both English and Anglicized colonial (recently “Americanized”) subjects. During the period surrounding the American War several decades earlier, which found Britain poised on the cusp between its *ancien régime* past and the global “age of revolutions,” these vocabularies surfaced in fraught relationships with changing realities. The appeals by Anglo-American subjects to being “enslaved” by the British government during the disputes initiated with the Stamp Act have been well documented. Despairing over internecine strife within the British Empire in the concluding phases of that conflict (apparently not recognizing that the recent Declaration of Independence had rendered such anguish moot), an article

in the *London Evening Post* for 27 March 1777 described the American Revolution as an inevitable outgrowth of repression. "With such a virtuous Parliament, and so large an army as is necessary to keep the Americans in a state of vassalage," its author asked what his British countrymen could expect: "Who does not see *dungeons, bolts, chains, and shackles*?" Even "the most credulous and most consummate ass amongst us," the writer continued, "must see *that slavery is his doom*" under these circumstances.²² British repression of the Americans, creating political "slavery," led the author here to fear the same "shackles" at home. But between these fears of repression and the "desolated" condition of the "slaughtered and impoverished" abroad, the author found some occasion for hope. Alluding to earlier heroes of liberty, the author noted that "all the tyrants in Christendom could never enslave a *Sydney*, a *Hampden*, or a *Russell*," and concluded: "Liberty will find an asylum in the American forests, from whence British tyrants will never be able to dislodge her" ("To the Printer of the *London Evening Post*," p. 4).

By the moment at which Victor arrives in London, at the turn of the nineteenth century, America had renewed revolutionary significance. The success of the newly formed American Republic and nascent conceptions of political and social emancipation (from the efflorescence of Rousseauvian political thought to the arguments for "perfectibility" advanced by Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin) had transformed the political landscape. The American Revolution introduced a wholly revised political vocabulary, in which politics became inseparable from appeals to collective well-being and democratic participation. Events in France in turn witnessed newly codified appeals to the rights of man and citizen, as well as more vivid and capacious appeals to social transformation. As Europe headed ever further toward calamity and destruction, America continued to present an alternative for radicals of Mary Wollstonecraft's generation. Wil Verhoeven has shown how the revolutionary discourses of the 1790s encompassed both abstractly utopian and ruthlessly practical turns to America. As a site of possibility frequently described as an "asylum," America

²² "Toby Trim," "To the Printer of the *London Evening Post*," 27 March 1777, p. 4.

accordingly belonged to an earlier imaginary: as a space of imagined freedom and the background for emerging appeals to independence. Mary Wollstonecraft fantasized about moving to a farm in America and seriously explored the possibility as “a refuge for her impoverished sisters.”²³ In *Frankenstein*, the monster expresses his own desire to escape to South America with the female companion whose projected creation motivates Victor’s original trip to Britain. This was an avenue later considered by one of Shelley’s close friends. “There is no freedom in Europe—that’s certain,” Lord Byron wrote several years later; “it is besides a worn out portion of the globe,” he continued, expressing his intention to move to the Americas, ultimately settling on South America as the only remaining site of freedom. “I want a country—and a home—and if possible—a free one,” Byron noted, and, describing the “Anglo-Americans” as “a little too coarse,” he wondered if he could get letters to “Boliver and his government.”²⁴

Byron might appear to represent the vanguard of a new wave of thinking about freedom, as a sequel of sorts to the American schemes involving Charles Wollstonecraft and Mary Wollstonecraft herself. Yet as becomes evident from his remarks about the “worn out” freedom of Europe, together with his remarks elsewhere disparaging England’s status as a land of liberty, Byron maintained (as with his ironic comments about “Habeas Corpus”) an obliquely critical perspective on the very

²³ Wil Verhoeven, *Americomania and the French Revolution Debate in Britain, 1789–1802* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), p. 188. Among those “fiercely independent” radicals, whose creeping unease with events in Europe prompted them to consider moving to an alternative mode of existence in the Western states, was Shelley’s uncle, Charles Wollstonecraft, while aspirations for “a life of agrarian simplicity far removed from the corrupting impact of conventional society” were also shared by her mother (Verhoeven, *Americomania*, pp. 187–88). Wollstonecraft’s lover, Gilbert Imlay, succeeded in playing what Verhoeven wittily terms the “Èmile card” (*Americomania*, p. 189, n. 71). Yet Imlay’s claims to be able to provide Shelley’s mother with a version of “utopian sociability”—and more concretely the amount of money “sufficient to have procured a farm in America” that would have been “an independence”—fell apart, amidst shady dealings, the encroaching realities of frontier life and Imlay’s own far from spotless character (Verhoeven, *Americomania*, pp. 189, 188; Verhoeven quotes from a February 1795 letter from Wollstonecraft to Imlay).

²⁴ Lord Byron, letter to John Cam Hobhouse, 3 October 1819, in *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1973–82), VI, 225–27.

idea of freedom. Shelley carried this critique still further. By the time she wrote *Frankenstein*, both the personal and larger political outcomes of the hopes represented by America had echoed across a further generation. Even more than Byron, her friend and confidante, Shelley remained self-critical and self-aware about the ways emerging strains of thinking about freedom, in their idealistic and revolutionary guises, remained intertwined with—even fatally tainted by—their earlier histories. The defense of liberty associated with Hampden and the escape to the wilds of America, respectively, were imagined as alternatives to the repression of archaic tyranny. With the added disappointments of recent decades, they had become intertwined with the failure of revolutionary hopes on the Continent. While Byron's remarks make clear how the Americas continued to present a hope of escape, Shelley remained acutely aware—and made the reader of *Frankenstein* acutely aware—that these were diminished and destructive hopes, transposed to an expanded field of economic and imperial activity but marked by the perpetuation of the same damaging logics.



Shelley decentered *Frankenstein* from its European moorings, I have argued, while providing the nation of her birth with pointed but oblique significance in the novel's final volume. Turning in conclusion to Victor's travels to the Scottish islands and his encounter with the "wide Atlantic" will make clear how these respective facets of the novel converged with Shelley's overarching critique of freedom. Victor Frankenstein finds himself crippled by encroaching depression, as we have seen, during his travels through England, his encounters with shining exemplars of "Whig" freedom reinforcing rather than alleviating his tortured condition. Victor finally ensconces himself for the task of creating a companion for the monster in a somewhat improbable location: the distant islands of Scotland. Embarking by sailboat from Scotland soon thereafter, Victor makes a familiar statement of his isolated condition: "I had no compass with me, and was so little acquainted with the geography of this part of the world that the sun was of little benefit to

me. I might be driven into the wide Atlantic, and feel all the tortures of starvation, or be swallowed up in the immeasurable waters that roared and buffeted around me" (*Frankenstein*, p. 133). Despite Victor's limited grasp on his location as he sets sail back for England, the significance of "geography" to the novel becomes ever more acute. Approaching what he takes to be English land, whose "wild and rocky" scenery gives way to familiar "traces of cultivation," Victor finds himself "suddenly transported back to the neighbourhood of civilized man" (p. 133). Greeted strangely by the locals, Victor is nonetheless taken aback, noting that "surely it is not the custom of Englishmen to receive strangers so inhospitably"; "I do not know," one replies, "what the custom of the English may be; but it is the custom of the Irish to hate villains" (p. 134). As he remonstrates, Victor is advised to present himself to the magistrate. Baffled by "this strange dialogue," he responds combatively: "Why am I to give an account of myself? Is not this a free country?" (p. 134).

The ostensible reason for the suspicion is the murder of Victor's friend Clerval by the monster: a case of mistaken identity that threatens to lead to Victor's long-term imprisonment. In explicitly binding together the continued downward spiral of Victor's circumstances with the threatened curtailment of his liberty, the neglected episode of Frankenstein's accidental arrival in Ireland has crucial significance to the progressively attenuated and ironized "freedom" I have been concerned to track in Shelley's novel.²⁵ Eighteenth-century Ireland was the

²⁵ Randel's suggestion that this episode is Shelley's "representation of the bloody [1798] Irish rebellion" seems excessive, although his observation that Victor may arrive in Northern Ireland remains suggestive, given connections with the United Irishmen and the French landing (see "The Political Geography of Horror," p. 482). In *An Address to the Irish People*, which Percy Shelley had published following his 1812 journey to Ireland, the poet emphasized the cause of "happiness and liberty": "let every street of the city, and field of the country, be connected with thoughts, which liberty has made holy. Be warm in your cause, yet rational, and charitable, and tolerant—never let the oppressor grind you into justifying his conduct by imitating his meanness" (Percy Bysshe Shelley, *An Address to the Irish People* [Dublin: n.p., 1812], p. 8). While Shelley's enthusiasm carried him also to speak of encouraging children to "lisp of Freedom in the cradle," the author of *Frankenstein* cast a more scathingly ironic eye upon these legacies, even as she aligned herself elsewhere with the paternalistic, moralizing tone evident in Shelley's direction to "Be free and be happy, but first be wise and good" (Shelley, *An Address to the Irish People*, pp. 8, 7).

site of often brutal colonial policies, legitimated by the penal code that denied the majority Catholic population secure rights to property and legal protection. Alongside these festering legacies had come the added repressive measures—including extraordinary rendition and martial law—implemented in the wake of the 1798 uprising. This fraught legal and political status made Ireland the monstrous inversion of English liberty.²⁶ Yet given the proximity of English liberty to absolutism and repression (exemplified in Victor's encounters with such symbols as the Tower of London during his arrival in the putative home of freedom), Ireland may equally represent that history's logical fulfillment. While his misrecognition of Ireland for England entails identifying the latter as a "free country," this episode equally places that standing into question, recalling the oppressive legacies and encroaching powers by which that freedom remained circumscribed. That is to say, when Victor asks whether he is in a "free country," the institutions and legal codes to which he turns for an affirmative answer point equally to the hollowness of that designation and its attendant freedoms.

When Victor returns to Europe following the episode in Ireland, where he discovers the further carnage wrought by the monster in his absence, these logics receive more fulsome expression and elaboration. Describing his condition as that of a "free man," he goes on to ask: "what freedom?" Released from his imprisonment in Ireland, Victor remains trapped within the psychological torment resulting from his tragic downfall. With the death of his remaining family members, he reaches the further nadir that prompts him to compare his freedom to that of a "peasant" whose "family have been massacred . . . his cottage burnt, his lands laid waste," leaving him "turned adrift, homeless, pennyless, and alone, but free"

²⁶ In this, Ireland became only the most obvious—because most proximate—example of a dynamic operative throughout the British Empire, exacerbated by observations like that of James Mill that colonial peoples do not have the same standards for freedom. The scorched-earth account of "freedom" that comes into focus by the end of *Frankenstein* found both its limit and logical endpoint, I propose, in the Americas. But see also the scenes of raging fire and destruction that follow the arrival of the Western protagonist to India in Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary* (1811), a book of interest to the Shelleys.

(*Frankenstein*, p. 145). The episode in Ireland marks the culmination of the respective narrative logics that carry Victor to this point: that of his tragic responsibility and the novel's decentering of Western geographies. Victor's threatened prosecution for the murder of Clerval, in an ironic doubling of his own earlier responsibility for the prosecution of servant girl Justine for the murder of his brother, appears as the ironic fulfillment, in one respect, of justice: where Victor had earlier held himself responsible for Justine's death, here that self-designation of "murderer" takes on the guise of a formal legal charge (if a misplaced one in this specific case). This sudden reversal in Victor's circumstances coincides with his inadvertent arrival in Ireland, a location in which English liberty and the "freedom" associated with voyaging more deeply into the Atlantic encounter their ironic mirror images. At the culminating point of Victor's tragedy, the "free country" and its antitheses finally become radically inseparable, even indistinguishable from each other.

Victor Frankenstein's creation, both the act and its offspring, has proven notoriously challenging to critics seeking to fix its significance. Rather than pursuing an allegorical reading, a historicist collage, or the putative liberation of "form" from politics, I have taken cues here from the subtleties of Shelley's own narrative design and its geopolitical reference points to recover the political resonances that Shelley insinuated into her account of Victor's story—extending to what, aware of the term's current weight, I have termed a pointed critique. My point has not been to suggest that the novel's decentered Anglo-American context predominates, any more than to make a single claim about what *Frankenstein* is ultimately "about." In attending less to the novel's central act of creation than to the resulting trail of destruction, I have eschewed monolithic appeals to revolutionary hopes (and their chastening) in favor of attending more closely to the path Victor's "catastrophe" takes and the wreckage encountered along the way. While the origins of their stories are exceptional, the fate to which Frankenstein and his immolated creation succumb appear far less extraordinary in light of the wider logics with which Shelley aligns their conditions. As the scene in which Victor compares his condition to that of a "peasant" and his ravaged family powerfully reveals,

Shelley had the tragedy of her protagonist intersect with—and during his imprisonment within Ireland become more directly intertwined with—a tangled history of evacuated freedoms and attenuated liberties. By attending less to the revolutionary atmosphere in which *Frankenstein* begins than to the scorched earth on which it ends up, we return to view different trajectories for the “freedoms” invoked by the story. At the same time, we make newly audible the continuing resonance behind Victor’s appeal: “what freedom” indeed?

At the same time as looking backward to the fraught history of English liberty, Shelley looked to the future, as accounts of *Frankenstein’s* engagement with emerging Western narratives about “man,” whether their locus is the rational citizen or exploited worker, have similarly shown. In this essay I have emphasized the increasingly hegemonic conceptions of freedom that were soon to encompass a growing swath of the world’s population in their grasp (and whose afterlives continue to underpin modern political and economic life as we know it). The uniformly bleak outcome of *Frankenstein* leaves the sweeping revolutionary hopes that lie in its background trampled in the dust. Yet its focus also turns more pointedly, I have argued, to where an arguably more pervasive history of freedom promised to leave mankind. As critical discussions of *The Last Man* have similarly underscored, the ambit of Shelley’s fiction extended to wider-reaching concerns with the eminence of Western man (and, in the case of that novel, the precariousness of man’s tenure on the planet).²⁷ Far from the West presenting an idealized locus for freedom’s flourishing, *Frankenstein* subverts and contorts that status, revealing how these lands of liberty and sites of prospective freedom not only remain haunted by their demonized opposites but also emerge as the

²⁷ As Barbara Johnson notes, “The Western world is about to fend off definitively the threat of the East” in *The Last Man*, but “where Western man expects to encounter and to master his other, he finds himself faced with the absolute Other” in the guise of “the Plague, which extends out over the entire world from the point of encounter between East and West” (*A Life with Mary Shelley*, p. 11). The plague “is thus in a sense that which replaces the victory of the West over the East,” whose “lethal universality” offers “a nightmarish version of the desire to establish a universal discourse, to spread equality and fraternity throughout the world” (*A Life with Mary Shelley*, p. 11). More recent accounts of *The Last Man* have discussed its resonance with Anthropocene thinking.

unintended progenitor of their own dark sides. Decoupling *Frankenstein* from its assumed European moorings and illuminating its fraught ties with the British isles, Europe, and the wider Atlantic world reveals how Shelley shaped these concerns into a pointed critique, inseparable from the novel's tragic form and similarly inseparable from its expansive geography—beginning with the decentering of relations between East and West, redoubled in Victor's travels through supposed lands of liberty, and reaching its outer limits in the projection of a destructive pathway through the Americas as the last remaining site of a “freedom” not only compatible with destruction but actively sustained by the attrition of human and nonhuman life.

Binghamton University

ABSTRACT

John Owen Havard, “‘What Freedom?’: *Frankenstein*, Anti-Occidentalism, and English Liberty” (pp. 305–331)

“If he were vanquished,” Victor Frankenstein states of his monstrous creation in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), “I should be a free man.” But he goes on: “Alas! what freedom? such as the peasant enjoys when his family have been massacred before his eyes, his cottage burnt, his lands laid waste, and he is turned adrift, homeless, penniless, and alone, but free.” Victor's circumstances approximate the deracinated subject of an emergent economic liberalism, while looking to other destitute and shipwrecked heroes. Yet the ironic “freedom” described here carries an added charge, which Victor underscores when he concludes this account of his ravaged condition: “Such would be my liberty.” This essay revisits the geographic plotting of *Frankenstein*: the digression to the East in the nested “harem” episode, the voyage to England, the neglected episode of Victor's imprisonment in Ireland, and the creature's desire to live in South America. Locating Victor's concluding appeal to his “free” condition within the novel's expansive geography amplifies the political stakes of his downfall, calling attention to not only his own suffering but the wider trail of destruction left in his wake. Where existing critical accounts have emphasized the French Revolution and its violent aftermath, this obscures the novel's pointed critique of a deep and tangled history of *English* liberty and its destructive legacies. Reexamining the novel's geography in tandem with its use of form similarly allows us to rethink the overarching narrative design of *Frankenstein*, in ways that disrupt, if not more radically dislocate, existing rigid ways of thinking about the novel.

Keywords: Mary Shelley; *Frankenstein*; freedom; Liberalism; Romanticism