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## psychiatry in literature

### Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: scientific breakthrough precipitates post-traumatic stress disorder – the literary first

Greg Wilkinson

Mary Shelley's (1797–1851) *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is a psychiatric revelation. Prometheus created man, stole fire from heaven to benefit mankind and inspired civilisation; condemned by Zeus to eternal torment, an eagle fed on his immortal liver (seat of emotion). Shelley reanimates the allegory with deceiving, ethical, geographical, introspective, Gothic, homicidal, Romantic, scientific and theological substance.

'On a dreary night of November', Victor Frankenstein, natural philosopher and chemist, is horrified by his monstrous reanimation: 'I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. [...] I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe [...] now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. [...] This was the commencement of a nervous fever, which confined me for several months'.

Frankenstein's monster flees; and Victor endures re-experiencing, avoidance and hyperarousal: for example 'Unable to compose my mind to sleep [...] I was disturbed by the wildest dreams', 'I trembled excessively; I could not endure to think of, and far less allude to, the occurrences of the previous night', 'Walking up and down in the greatest agitation, listening attentively, catching and fearing each sound as if it were to announce the approach of the demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life', 'Mingled with this horror, I felt the bitterness of disappointment', 'I sought to avoid the wretch whom I feared every turning of the street would present to my view. I did not dare return to the apartment [...] I traversed the streets without any clear conception of where I was or what I was doing. My heart palpitated in the sickness of fear, and I hurried on with irregular steps, not daring to look about me', 'I felt my flesh tingle with excess of sensitiveness', 'I was unable to remain for a single instant in the same place', 'The form of the monster on whom I had bestowed existence was forever before my eyes', 'The pertinacity with which I continually recurred to the same subject, persuaded him [Clerval] that my disorder indeed owed its origin to some uncommon and terrible event', 'I had committed deeds of mischief beyond description horrible', 'I was lifeless and did not recover my senses for a long, long time', 'sight of a chemical instrument would renew all the agonies of my nervous symptoms'.

Spring brings recovery: 'By very slow degrees [...] with frequent relapses', 'perhaps never entirely', 'gloom disappeared'. Soon, murderous consequences of his creation generate despair, grief, rage, recrimination, remorse and vengeance.

In counterpoint, Mary's husband Percy Bysshe Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) transmutes Aeschylus's Prometheus from benefactor to liberator: 'of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends'. *Caveat lector*.

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