This week, we read the second generation of Romantics. In his sonnet, “To Wordsworth,” Percy Shelley writes a kind of epitaph that buries Wordsworth well before he actually dies:

Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.

The second half of the last line, “that thou shouldst cease to be” acts as a dividing line between the two generations. Nevertheless, both Percy Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley allude to the first generation of Romantics in “Mont Blanc” and *Frankenstein*. In this way, we can conceive of this week as a transitional state. At the same time, however, both Shelleys explore themes of the creator and his creation, and the relationship between mind and matter—themes that while previously explored by the first generation of Romantics, still continue to intrigue us.

Biographically, Percy Shelley wrote “Mont Blanc” in the summer of 1816, and it was published in 1817 in “History of a Six Week’s Tour.” Mary Shelley began “Frankenstein” a few weeks afterward and it was first published in 1818. Mary and Percy were strongly influenced by their natural surroundings; the two lovers spent time together on a sea of ice, a motif that appears in both of their works.

While Shelley wrote “Mont Blanc” as a response to Coleridge’s “Hymn before sun-rise, in the vale of Chamouni.” Shelley, unlike Coleridge, questions the natural sublime as he attempts to discover meaning in the natural scene of Mont Blanc. Shelley does not see the mountain as a reason to believe in God, like Coleridge did. On the contrary, Shelley chooses not to believe in God. Although Shelley alludes to Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” and Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”
throughout “Mont Blanc,” Shelley’s project is distinct from his predecessor’s; Mont Blanc is a sublime encounter for Shelley, in which he explores the relationship between the universe and the mind. Metaphor seems to be the force that brings mind and matter together; the natural world holds a sublime power over Shelley’s imagination: the Arv River flows into the “feeble brook” of the human mind in order to inspire, and the cave where the witch Poesy resides is not a physical space, but a metaphysical one, reminiscent of Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” and man’s quest for truth. Metaphor, then, seems to bring mind and matter together.

In class, we plan on going through “Mont Blanc” stanza by stanza. Each of you will be responsible for paraphrasing a stanza. Here are some questions to keep in mind:

Stanza 1: Jen: What is the relationship between the “everlasting universe of things” and the mind?

Stanza 2: Sam: How can we interpret the “cave of the witch Poesy?” What does it mean that the ravine comes together with the cave (or the human mind)?

Stanza 3: Zack: How does the theme of materiality work in this stanza? (Also intro to Mont Blanc)

Stanza 4: Emily: Track the glaciers. What is the relationship between nature and death? Where does the river figure into all of this?

Stanza 5: Julia and Paul: How does this last stanza return to the beginning of the poem? Now what do we think is the relationship between mind and matter?

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, though conceived of originally as a ghost story in a competition with Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, can be read as a conscious return to how one creates and the relationship between the creator and the created. Mary Shelley’s characters, Victor Frankenstein (creator) and his Creature (created) have left a legacy that continues to pervade popular culture and Hollywood. There are hundreds of critical articles about *Frankenstein* and it is not without reason; the novel lends itself to allegory. While we can read
Frankenstein in many ways (a representation of family and social structures, of scientific discover, of colonialism, etc), I would like to propose that connects Frankenstein to the project of “Mont Blanc,” the relationship between mind and matter. Unlike Hollywood representations, the Creature has an amazing mind and is arguably the most articulate character in the book. He also is gigantic physically (matter), yet he fails to hinge the two worlds of mind and matter together; the Creature’s grotesque appearance frightens. Frankenstein, on the other hand, has mind, but not matter. He uses uncanny and supernatural language, but he fails to use his voice or navigate the natural world effectively (matter). ¹

In class, we are going to focus on particular scenes, or moments “that go wrong:”

1. Passage where Frankenstein creates and abandons his Creature. How does sight function here?

2. The Creature’s interaction with the De Laceys and his encounter with the blind man? Why does the Creature blow it? Again, think about sight here.

3. The creation and destruction of the female monster. How can we think about anxieties about gender here?

General Questions:

- What does the epistolary (framing) form do for the novel?

- Why does Mary Shelley make the Creature so eloquent? (There is an entire section of the Creature’s interiority.)

- General themes that intrigue me: sublime vs. gigantism, gender (always), light motif, doppelganger motif, and biographical context.

¹ I should note that Mary Shelley too, alludes to other Romantics and scholars. For instance, she quotes Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” to reflect the theme of pursuit between the Creator and the Creature and also to further emphasize Captain Walton’s voyage. The Creature reads “Paradise Lost” among other canonical texts.