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FRANKENSTEIN AT 200 YEARS

Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein was first published in 1818 and has never been out of print since. Within a few years it was adapted to the stage and its key themes and ideas became a part of popular culture. Film and television eventually gave rise to a succession of new interpretations. Frankenstein figures in a wide variety of literature, art, advertising, and political cartoons as well as a great deal of serious scholarship. Yet, like the monster, the novel is a curious assemblage of many elements: chance events, scientific and social innovation and ideas, often controversial, some present already, others new or just then entering the germinating phenomenon of a popular mass consciousness.

Frankenstein owes its existence to the most powerful volcanic eruption in recorded history in 1815. In April of that year, Mount Tambora spewed out an estimated 10 cubic miles of rock and ash with a mass of some 10 billion tons. Tens of thousands were killed outright or by the tsunamis that followed. Situated in what is now Indonesia, it injected into the stratosphere ash that took years to dissipate, causing global temperatures to plunge. Crop failures, famine and disease killed tens of thousands more, even in the Northern hemisphere where 1816 became known as The Year Without a Summer.

This was the summer that Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, with her future husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, the poet Lord Byron and Byron's physician, John Polidori, expected to enjoy the sun and scenery of Geneva, Switzerland. Instead, because of incessant rain and cold, they stayed indoors, read ghost stories aloud, and decided to write and share their own tales of horror. Mary's effort eventually developed into the novel Frankenstein.

The work is no simple horror story but a reimagining of the events in the biblical Genesis. Shelley's monster is not mindless but, rather, finds and reads a copy of Milton's Paradise Lost, a 17th

Century epic poem concerning the creation and "fall" of man. Later, on encountering Victor Frankenstein, his creator, the monster says:

"I read it ... as a true history. ... I often referred the several situations ... to my own. Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but ... [Adam had] come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, ... he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition ... when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me."

Then there is Victor Frankenstein's ambition. He had read the works of alchemists when young. But by the time he began studying medicine, he:

"exchanged the discoveries of recent inquirers for the dreams of forgotten alchemists. [They had] ... sought immortality and power; such views, although futile, were grand; but now the scene was changed. ... I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth."

Yet Victor was inspired anew by a professor who pointed out:

"The modern masters ... have indeed performed miracles. ... They ascend into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows."

Whereupon Victor resolves that:

"more, far more, will I achieve; treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way,

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explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation.”

This was the early 19th Century. The discovery of oxygen had destroyed the Phlogiston theory of combustion. Antoine Lavoisier (1743-1794) put the science of chemistry on a firm foundation. The planet Uranus had been discovered. The first manned hot air balloon flight took place in 1783. And Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) had captured lightning in a jar using a child's toy. Indeed, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) wrote an essay in 1755 entitled “The Modern Prometheus,” the very subtitle Mary Shelley chose for Frankenstein, in which Kant asserted:

“There is such a thing as right taste [emphasis in the original] in natural science, which knows how to distinguish the wild extravagances of unbridled curiosity from cautious judgments of reasonable credibility. From the Prometheus of recent times Mr. Franklin, who wanted to disarm the thunder, down to the man who wants to extinguish the fire in the workshop of Vulcanus, ... Man never can be anything more than a man.”

Here we see the “mad scientist” trope that Shelley explored in Frankenstein. It has gone on to grow and assume countless forms and terrify people with fears of such things as computers, nanotechnology and genetic engineering.

Believers in supernatural religions would rather not consider it, but there is also a compelling intersection between the scientific approach, the general question of ambition and Genesis. It is a subtle subtext in Frankenstein. But it is this: anyone, any being, human or divine, that would undertake to create other sentient beings, owes a responsibility to those beings. Victor Frankenstein, playing the role of Milton's Creator-deity, is found to be deeply flawed. Might God also be defective?

In Byron's play Cain, the character of Satan says of God:

“He is all-powerful, must all-good, too, follow? I judge but by the fruits—and they are bitter—which I must feed on for a fault not mine.”

There is much more as well in the assemblage of assorted ideas to be found in Shelley's remarkable work. It is a feast of food for thought that is not yet exhausted.

All NTCOF events can be found through our [website calendar](#), or our [meetup page](#), from which you can RSVP, at: - www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-first Sundays of the month, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant “The Vineyard” - inside the hotel - in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: Nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Dominion, Le Havre, Ticket To Ride, Carcassonne, and other fun games!

Have Another Idea? Email or call! Read bulletins & presentations and post on the FORUM at www.churchoffreethought.org LIKE US at www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/ and sign up for our Twitter feed at twitter.com/ntcof !

PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:

“STATE & CHURCH”

The American Story

> Sunday, July 1, 2018 <

COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH

(Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then take the frontage road east just past the Best Western; service starts at 10:30 but come early for coffee and snacks - you can bring some! - and conversation)

THANK YOU !!

FOR YOUR GENEROUS DONATION OF TIME & FINANCIAL

SUPPORT to the NTCOF !!

It is needed, appreciated and Tax-Deductible !

The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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