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The Arctic and “Other Spaces” in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

In “The Body of Frankenstein’s Monster,” Cecil Helman reminds us of the deeply entrenched differences between the legend of Frankenstein, as re-imagined by Hollywood, and the story of Frankenstein, as originally imagined by Mary Shelley in her 1818 novel. In the iconic 1931 film, the monster is given life by lightning and then dies “by an enraged peasantry in a singular *auto-da-fe*” (220); in the novel, the monster comes to life on a chilly November evening and then dies as he “floats remorsefully away on an ice floe, exulting in the freezing death to come” (220). It should come as no surprise that Hollywood has reworked the story to the point that it bears little resemblance to Shelley’s novel, however Helman points to an interesting elemental difference between the two endings: fire in the film, ice in the novel. Because of Hollywood’s influence, it is easy to forget that in Mary Shelley’s novel the monster—or *daemon*—is a creature of the cold,

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living and thriving on glacial mountains tops, rowing across the chilling North Atlantic, and mushing a team of sled dogs across the frozen North West passage. Though often unacknowledged as such, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a northern story.

A current trend in recent criticism on the novel focuses on Shelley's Arctic sequences. Much of the criticism on Shelley's Arctic has been historically inflected, drawing upon the novel's framing narrative to demonstrate Shelley's critique of Britain's imperialist agenda in the immediate post-Napoleonic world. While this work is certainly valuable, I would like to bracket off these concerns and consider another approach to the novel's framing narrative. In this paper, I will read Mary Shelley's north in light of Foucault's theory of heterotopias, of those "other spaces" that are set apart, spatially, temporally, from the rest of the world. Mary Shelley's Arctic can be read as a heterotopia, as an othered space, which on one hand promises positive change and transformation while on the other threatens death and destruction. Moreover, for Mary Shelley, these other(ed) spaces are not merely locations or settings in the novel; heterotopian spaces are narratives in themselves that structure the novel.

It is not an anomaly that the Arctic features prominently in *Frankenstein*. At the time Shelley was writing her novel there was renewed interest in Arctic exploration. This was due to a political situation in Britain that prompted further exploration of the Northwest Passage, the elusive route linking the Atlantic and Pacific oceans via the polar region. In renewing this interest, the British returned to a task abandoned roughly two hundred years earlier. Throughout the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods there had been regular attempts to navigate the Arctic's waters in hopes of finding a route to the Orient. Martin Frobisher, John Davis, and Henry Hudson were among those who sailed into the

region, but all met with either little success or outright disaster: in 1578 Frobisher returned from the Arctic with twelve hundred tonnes of what turned out to be fool's gold (Graf 35-36, 334); in 1585 Davis rediscovered Greenland, which the Vikings had unsuccessfully settled several centuries earlier (Berton 17); in 1610 Hudson was cast adrift when his crew mutinied (17). In 1631 Luke Foxe explored what would be named Foxe Channel and Foxe Basin, but returned home to claim that there was "no route to the Orient south of the Arctic circle" (17-18). In the 1700s there were other British attempts at Arctic exploration, including Samuel Hearne's overland expedition in the early 1770s, but generally enthusiasm for exploration of Arctic waters had diminished after the Jacobean period. However, when the Napoleonic Wars came to an end in 1816-17, the British navy was "a vast armada of men and ships in search of a *raison d'etre*" (Graf 80). Without Napoleon the British needed a new cause, so "[i]ts new enemy would be the elements themselves" (Berton 18). As further incentive for the cause, there was an increase of Russian exploration through the Arctic, which threatened Britain's desire to control the region (Graf, 80) and there were reports that the waters of northern Greenland had been comparatively free of ice for two seasons in a row (Graf 80), reports which no doubt helped further fuel the myth that the Polar Sea was temperate, ice-free water year round (Berton 21-2). Although the value in discovering the Northwest Passage was arguably "symbolic rather than commercial" (21), Britain's parliament authorized a prize of five thousand pounds for the first crew to reach 89 degrees N (Graf 81). In the spring and summer of 1818, the year *Frankenstein* was published, four vessels sailed for the Arctic. Although none of the ships attained 89 degrees N (the farthest point reached was 80 degrees 37' N), the experience proved valuable, allowing for future voyages (Graf 82).

As a touch of irony to this first wave of Arctic voyages, one of the commanders who gained experience and prominence from this voyage was John Franklin, whose eventual demise in the Arctic circa 1845 was so awful that it surpasses even Mary Shelley's Gothic imagination: Franklin's crew had become crazed due to lead poisoning (their tinned foods had been soldered with lead which leached into the food) and they eventually resorted to cannibalism as a desperate attempt to fend off starvation (Beattie 60-61, 160-61).

Several critics have demonstrated that Mary Shelley was very much aware of these events and was influenced by this renewed interest in the Arctic when writing *Frankenstein*. In "'A Paradise of My Own Creation': *Frankenstein* and the Improbable Romance of Polar Exploration," Jessica Richard demonstrates that Mary Shelley had likely read the various articles on Polar exploration published in *The Quarterly Review* in 1816 and 1817 while she was writing the final draft of *Frankenstein* (297, 309 n.). Richard writes, "When Shelley added the polar frame to her manuscript, then, she gave her novel's caution about scientific quests a specific contemporary application" (306) by implicitly censuring Britain's "hubristic ethic of exploration" (308). Karen Piper's article, "Inuit Diasporas: *Frankenstein* and the Inuit in England," furthers Richard's interpretation by claiming that Shelley was paying particular attention to "the almost obsessive discourse about the inhabitants of the North" in *The Quarterly Review* and in Pinkerton's *A General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels in All Parts of the World*, and so portrayed the monster as a kind of northern aboriginal (65). According to Piper, *Frankenstein*'s creature is intended to haunt the British imagination as a colonized subject: "the creature plays into European fears that these

‘savage’ inhabitants may someday be found peering into the very windows of the warm, English household” (68). Recently, in 2008, Laurie Garrison’s “Imperial Vision in the Arctic: Fleeting Looks and Pleasurable Distractions in Barker’s Panorama and Shelley’s *Frankenstein*” examines the visual representations of the polar region that were contemporaneous with Shelley’s novel. Garrison contrasts Shelley’s Arctic with the panorama of the north coast of Spitzbergen displayed in Henry Aston Barker’s Leicester Square Rotunda in 1819. According to Garrison, Barker’s panorama was an unquestioning celebration of Britain’s imperialist endeavours in the Arctic, which Mary Shelley was critiquing in *Frankenstein*’s framing narrative. Arctic exploration was in the news at the time Mary Shelley was working on her novel, much in the same way that the circumpolar region is in the news in our own time due to global warming. It is probably for this very reason that most of the articles on Mary Shelley’s Arctic have been published within the last ten years as we become conscious of and concerned with Arctic issues once again.

When Shelley traps Walton’s ship in the pack ice, her criticism is subtle and ironic and highlights a paradox in Britain’s exploration of the region. Britain was not concerned with the Arctic as a place in itself; instead, it was merely a passage to another place, the Pacific Ocean and the Orient. However, when ships were caught in the ice and forced to “winter over,” the passage suddenly became a place in itself, a place that begins to take hold in the imagination or take hold of the imagination. And yet in the novel’s framing narrative, Mary Shelley just barely describes the Arctic location. She simply gestures towards it, roughly sketching it out for her readers via Walton’s epistolary narrative. Once Walton is voyaging into the Arctic waters, his descriptions of what he

sees from the bridge of his ship are notably terse: he mentions a few sheets of ice, a few stiff gales, and remarks to his sister that he will be careful as he makes a course for himself “over the pathless seas” (23). Later, caught in the pack ice, he writes to his sister:

we were nearly surrounded by ice, which closed in the ship on all sides, scarcely leaving her the searoom in which she floated. Our situation was somewhat dangerous, especially as we were compassed round by a very thick fog. (25)

With thick fog and ice closing in, the situation is ominous. However, such moments in the text provide a kind of shorthand description of the Arctic without actually visualizing the region. The fog prevents our view. Garrison discusses the way that Walton quickly shifts his reader’s gaze from the landscape (or from what little can be seen of the landscape) to other considerations, such as Victor Frankenstein and the cowardice of his crew (par. 7). She points out that “the frame narrative of *Frankenstein* is less committed to depicting the wonders of the arctic landscape and more committed to using the temptations and illusions of this landscape as an analogy for flaws in imperial and scientific reasoning” (par. 7).

Given the mystery surrounding the Arctic, for Mary Shelley and the British reading public at the time the Arctic and Walton’s ship stuck in the Arctic were certainly “othered” spaces due to their remoteness, isolation, and the potential danger. Michel Foucault’s “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” theorizes the roles that these other spaces—such as Mary Shelley’s Arctic—perform in or for a society. In “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault focuses largely on principles of these heterotopias, providing descriptions “of those different spaces, those other places, in a kind of both mythical and

real contestation of the spaces in which we live” (352-53). Foucault’s heterotopias are spaces set aside from the regular course of time and space (for example, the honeymoon suite or the boarding school), or they are spaces that incorporate more than one time and more than one space (for example, the theatre or the library). Although many of the examples that Foucault gives are from contemporary western society (motels, movie-houses, etc.), Foucault’s ideas also encompass colonization projects, especially to the Puritan colonies of America in the seventeenth century, as they were idealistically conceived as “absolutely perfect places” (356). Of such spaces, Foucault writes,

they have, in relation to the rest of space, a function that takes place between two opposite poles. On the one hand they perform the task of creating a space of illusion that reveals how all of real space is more illusory, all the locations within which life is fragmented. On the other, they have the function of forming another space, another real space, as perfect, meticulous and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived and in a sketchy state. (356)

The characteristics of the colony can relate to the exploration and discovery of new regions as well, since exploration and discovery involve “forming another space, another real space” (356). According to Foucault, ships are also heterotopias, as they are “a floating part of space, a placeless place, that lives by itself, closed in on itself and at the same time poised in the infinite ocean” (356). A ship involved in exploration, like Walton’s in *Frankenstein*, can thus be read as a heterotopia within a heterotopia.¹

¹ For the most part, Foucault’s heterotopias are created spaces (such as gardens) as opposed to natural spaces (such as forests). However, a natural space or region, such as

In *Frankenstein* there are numerous other(ed) spaces. In fact most of the novel's main locations can be read as heterotopias. Victor Frankenstein's laboratory is one such heterotopia. The laboratory space is isolated from the social world (the nature of the experiments must be kept secret); it is a space where life and death co-mingle as dead tissues are reanimated into life (therefore it becomes a peculiar, morbid, liminal site). It is a place where time both passes and stands still as Frankenstein spends years on his labours and yet barely notices the passage of time because he is obsessed solely with his task. These qualities are doubled in the novel's second creation scene in the Orkneys: the lab's remoteness is increased due to the isolation of the Orkneys, and because two creatures are present—the original monster and the new one that Frankenstein is fashioning as its mate. Other heterotopias in *Frankenstein* include the university where Frankenstein is educated, the shack where the monster hides in the Alps, the prisons where Justine and Frankenstein are held after being convicted of the monster's crimes, and the many little rowboats floating throughout the text. However, the one that I will focus on is Walton's ship as a heterotopia within that larger Arctic heterotopia.

the Arctic, can also be considered a created space. As Rob Shields explains in *Places On the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity*,

Sites are never simply locations. Rather, they are sites for someone and of something. The cultural context of images and myths adds a socially constructed level of meaning to the *genus loci*, the classics' 'unique sense of place,' said to derive from the forms of the physical environment in a given site. (6)

A natural space such as the Arctic is also a created space, in that we inevitably bring certain attitudes, beliefs, discourses, "a social level of meaning" to such spaces. At the time of *Frankenstein's* publication in 1818, the Arctic was enjoying a renewed social level of meaning. For the British, after their successful defeat of Napoleon, the polar region offered – or was created as offering – yet another challenge, but also an opportunity for domination.

One important element of the heterotopia that Foucault suggests but doesn't stress in "Of Other Spaces" is that heterotopias are places of transformation, of change. Shelley's novel opens with a series of letters from Capt. Robert Walton to his sister in England (the entire novel is, in a sense, then recorded by Walton who ostensibly writes down Victor Frankenstein's narrative). In his first letter home, written from St. Petersburg, Walton reminds his sister that his lifelong dream of travelling to the Arctic is on the verge of being transformed into reality, thus even the cold northern breeze becomes a "wind of promise" (15). Walton tells his sister of his hopes "to accomplish some great purpose" (17) in the Arctic. Essentially, Walton hopes to transform himself to achieve "glory" (17) in the north. It is a hope that has particular poignancy for him, given his failure to achieve that glory as a poet (16). As a failed writer, he now no longer hopes to inscribe his achievement literally and literarily on the blank page, but metaphorically on the blankness of the Arctic, which in the early nineteenth century when Shelley was writing the novel (or at the end of the eighteenth century when Walton is voyaging north), was indeed a kind of *tabula rasa*, a blank slate waiting to be explored, mapped, narrated. Arguably, Walton *is* transformed, although this occurs when he is not actually voyaging, but instead when he is caught in the pack ice and unable to voyage any farther.

In the fourth letter that Walton writes home to his sister, he explains how the ship has become paralyzed due to the pack ice. This event intensifies the ship's heterotopian qualities. While Foucault does not particularly emphasize any kind of stasis in his discussion of heterotopias, many of the examples he gives of heterotopias directly involve stasis, isolation, and captivity (even while they may also involve change and transformation, as discussed above). Two examples that Foucault provides of stasis in

heterotopias are prisons and that “curious heterotopia of the cemetery” (353) in which everyone has “his own little box for his little personal decomposition” (354). The ship caught in pack ice is certainly imprisoned by that ice. Moreover, even though Walton mildly claims that the situation is only “somewhat dangerous” (25), it is also very likely that Walton’s ship may become a very large coffin for himself and his men, given the dicey survival record of ships in the Arctic. British records show that Arctic voyages were enormously risky: more than forty percent of Arctic whaling ships were lost between 1772 and 1852, which adds up to eighty out of 194 ships (Graf 73-74). In one year, in one location (Melville Bay, Greenland) fourteen were crushed by ice in 1819 (74).

While Foucault includes ships as heterotopias—“heterotopias *par excellence*,” in fact (356)—most heterotopias are not in motion, but are instead places that can be entered, visited, and exited, like motel rooms, theatres, or libraries. Once paralyzed by ice, Walton’s ship becomes open or vulnerable to the surrounding environment, and it becomes oddly “penetrable” (Foucault 355) by the strange travellers passing through the region. The very day that the ship is caught in the ice, Walton and his crew receive the first view of a figure that will later be revealed as the monster:

We perceived a low carriage, fixed on a sledge and drawn by dog, 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. (25)

Predictably, this glimpse of the man of “gigantic stature” has an unsettling effect upon Walton and the crew. Walton admits, “We were as we believed, many hundred miles from any land; but this apparition seemed to denote that it was not, in reality, so distant as we had supposed” (25). The next morning Walton and his crew receive their second sighting of a human, Victor Frankenstein on a dog sled. Walton comments that “He was not as the other traveller seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island, but an European” (26). For Frankenstein, as well as for Walton and his crew, the ship is a heterotopia—a place set aside from its surroundings—which becomes the place where he is saved from imminent death and rejuvenated.

For critics such as Richard, Piper, and Garrison, *Frankenstein*'s purpose is to expose the potentially violent hubris that informs and inspires exploration, imperialism, and science. Though Frankenstein recovers on board due to the captain's good care, he will nevertheless vehemently contradict and condemn Walton's worldview. When Walton confides in Frankenstein, he tells his newfound friend of his dreams of glory, his willingness to sacrifice his life for “the acquirement of the knowledge I sought” (29). In turn, Frankenstein will begin to tell the tale that will function as a counterpoint to Walton's imperialist worldview. Walton can be read as part of the trend that Mary Louise Pratt refers to as the new “planetary consciousness” of the eighteenth century, which emerged from Carl Linnaeus's *System of Nature*, published in 1735 (15). According to Pratt, in the second half of the eighteenth century,

scientific exploration was to become a focus of intense public interest, and a source of some of the most powerful ideational and ideological

apparatuses through which European citizenries related themselves to other parts of the world. (23)

With the Linnaean system, scientific explorations of the time had the descriptive means to classify all life on earth, “known and unknown” (Pratt 24). It was, in short, an aid to imperialism as it provided a schema for “making order out of chaos” (25). Walton can be read as a part of and as a product of this “planetary consciousness” in his desire to explore and acquire knowledge, when he explains:

I would sacrifice my fortune, my existence, my every hope, to the furtherance of my enterprise. One man’s life or death were but a small price to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought for the dominion I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race. (Shelley 29)

Frankenstein responds to these imperialist sentiments with his own story, which is framed in the narrative structure as a direct rebuttal to this worldview. Frankenstein presents his story as a disavowal of modern imperialism and science, and as a cautionary tale for Walton and his desire for “dominion.”

Frankenstein’s story would not have been told had it not been for the heterotopia that he happened to find in Walton’s ship. Frankenstein can take shelter there and relate what he has done and what has happened to him. When Frankenstein begins to tell his story, he adds another dimension to Walton’s ship-as-heterotopia. Once Frankenstein begins his narration, the ship then becomes—like those other heterotopias, the theatre and the cinema—a place that “has the power of juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces and locations which may be incompatible with each other” (Foucault 354). In

Walton's cabins, Frankenstein relates his story, told as a condemnation of the enterprise in which Walton's ship and crew are actively engaged (or in which they would be actively engaged, if it weren't for the ice surrounding the ship's hull). In turn, Frankenstein's story can be read as a kind of heterotopia in itself: it is a narrative so far removed from the everyday world that Walton can only preface it to his sister as "Strange and harrowing" (32), and yet it is, at least at this point in the novel, safely enclosed like a museum, like a garden, by the ship itself and by the framing narrative of the ship.²

Just as moviegoers will literally lose sight of the theatre around them, so when Frankenstein begins his own story do we lose sight of Walton's ship and the surrounding

² Potentially, by including Frankenstein's story as a heterotopia in itself, I am stretching Foucault's definition further than it should be stretched. However, Foucault does include theatres and cinemas as heterotopias because the play or film in itself "alternates as a series of places that are alien to each other" (354). The play or the film creates scenes and places that are incongruous – even "incompatible" (354) – with the direct surroundings. As well, Foucault indicates that art works can be treated as heterotopias when he mentions that carpets are a kind of heterotopia because they were originally intended as representations of gardens ("the carpet [is] a sort of movable garden in space" [354]). In this regard, Frankenstein presents a story which is "incompatible" with the surrounding ship, and certainly a narrative is as "movable" as a carpet (even more so). If narratives can be read as heterotopias, then *Frankenstein* becomes a series of nested heterotopias, of stories within stories, as Walton's narrative frames Frankenstein's narrative, which in turn will frame the monster's narrative.

The connection between narratives and heterotopias is interesting, especially when ships are involved. As I have said, Foucault claims that ships are heterotopias "*par excellence*" (356). Certainly one of the most famous ships of 19th-century literature is Jules Verne's submarine Nautilus—a heterotopia *par excellence* writ large. The Nautilus functions as a kind of underwater museum of civilization and natural history, containing artefacts and specimens from all around the world. Roland Barthes has discussed ships such as the Nautilus as fantasies of enclosure (65), which offers another angle for approaching Foucault's heterotopias—as enclosed spaces for fantasy. Certainly fantasy and narrative are closely related. In Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, the ship-as-heterotopia functions as an enclosed space for narrative. However, in this regard there is a big difference between the Nautilus and Walton's ship: when the Nautilus becomes trapped in ice, it becomes a near-death catastrophe for Captain Nemo and his crew, which nearly brings the story to a halt; although Walton's ship is certainly jeopardized by the pack ice, once it is trapped the story begins.

ice and fog. When his narrative is over, we return to Walton's ship and the epistolary frame narrative, and become aware of the immediate surroundings once again. Walton explains to his sister that he has become afraid that he may never see England again (215). He describes the situation:

We are still surrounded by mountains of ice, still in imminent danger of being crushed in their conflict. The cold is excessive, and many of my unfortunate comrades have already found a grave amidst this scene of desolation. (216)

As in the opening sections, this description of the landscape and the situation is cursory at best, and oddly lacking in distinct visual detail. Once again, as in the opening sequence, Walton turns his attention from the immediate situation and returns to Frankenstein, and to the story he has just been told. For Walton, whose mind remains dedicated to a scientific end, the veracity of the story that he has just heard becomes an issue. He writes to his sister:

His tale is connected, and told with an appearance of the simplest truth; yet I own to you that the letters of Felix and Safie, which he showed me, and the apparition of the monster seen from our ship, brought to me a greater conviction of the truth of his narrative than his assertions, however earnest and connected. (213)

When he further questions Frankenstein about "the particulars of his creature's formation" (213), Frankenstein misunderstands his line of questioning and angrily answers him: "Are you mad, my friend?...Or whither does your senseless curiosity lead you? Would you also create for yourself and the world a demoniacal enemy?" (213). In

this desire for proof, Walton is almost unwilling to accept the narrative as a heterotopia—as something enclosed upon itself, neatly bordered by itself—and wants to see that it has connections to the outside world. Walton’s desire to see Frankenstein’s story connect to the real world is soon realized. Shortly after Frankenstein finishes his narrative he dies, and the ice breaks apart clearing the way for the ship. Walton then finds the monster leaning over his creator’s now lifeless body. In this scene, the frame has been broken and one story has overlapped into the other or one *topia* has overlapped with the other. When the creature springs through the cabin window, he jumps to an “ice-raft” floating nearby, and effectively commits suicide on the ice: “He was soon borne away by the waves, and lost in the darkness and distance” (225). Both Walton’s and Frankenstein’s narratives—as well as the novel itself—end there. Moreover, one of the novel’s heterotopias ends there, as Frankenstein’s creature literally breaks the bounds of the ship-as-heterotopia, floating out in the unknown and unknowable distance.

In “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault discusses the ways that certain types of spaces are partitioned from the regular, daily world. Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel offers, among many other things, a gothic analysis of how “other spaces” work in a society. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley uses the Arctic as a heterotopia, as a space removed from the world known to her readership in the nineteenth century. Like all heterotopias, it is a place of transformation as all characters are radically altered in this Arctic space. The northern heterotopia offers transformation, but it comes at the risk of death: Walton’s worldview is forever changed and Frankenstein and his creature end their quest in death. However, in *Frankenstein*, heterotopias do not occur singly. Instead, they are nested, and thus framed by, one another: in this Arctic heterotopia, Walton’s ship becomes a heterotopia within a

heterotopia, set apart from the surrounding polar ice and snow. Like a theatre or cinema, the ship contains what could be called a further heterotopia, Frankenstein's narrative (which will enclose a further narrative space, the monster's own narrative). In reading *Frankenstein* through the lens of Foucault's "Of Other Spaces," we see the way that these spaces perform aesthetically in the text by defining narrative spaces, by delineating the novel's narrative story lines. Spaces are not just settings or locations in *Frankenstein*, they are narratives.

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