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1

Lightning's Generators

The Spirit of the Age

Scanning Romantic multiple atmospheres of lightning-language, it may seem extravagant to invoke William Empson's notion of socially structured "key words" (Ben Franklin's key-bait notwithstanding). Empson's Romantic-era quarry is of course well known: the cluster of *sense*, *sensible*, *sensible* in Wordsworth's poetry and the canny candor of *candid* and *candor* in Austen, or the synapses of *sense* and *sensibility*. Insofar as key words magnetize attention and play in distribution, bearing loads of inference for literary imagination, *lightning* qualifies (and my relief is that Empson did not pick up this one).

Lightning sparks language everywhere in the age of Romanticism. No other trope will do for Wollstonecraft to convey the sudden recognitions that reading can release:

they lie by for use, till some fortuitous circumstance makes the information dart into the mind with illustrative force. . . . Like the lightning's flash are many recollections; one idea assimilating and explaining another, with astonishing rapidity. . . . Over this subtile electric fluid, how little power do we possess, and over it how little power can reason obtain! (*VRW* 6.260–61)

A generation on, a poet who married Wollstonecraft's daughter would point the lightninged mind outward and abroad: "The cloud of mind is discharging its collected lightning" into atmospheres both conceptual and political, wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley, in his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (xii). In the drama itself, lightning is divine violence and torture, vengeance, and liberation. Shelley was soon imagining the generation of word-power from the mental



FIGURE 1.1. The First Electrocutation (1866). Gustave Doré, Satan and rebels lightninged out of Heaven, *Paradise Lost*: “Him the Almighty Power / Hurl’d headlong flaming from the ethereal sky” (1.44–45). Satan’s spear, a gleaming diagonal, is no match for the superior double-bolt issuing from the dynamo of light.

momentum: “It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words,” charged with “the spirit of the age” (*Defence of Poetry* 56–57). When these words were published by Mary Shelley in 1840, readers of that later day could still catch the charge, and be regenerated.

The Godfather was Milton. In *Paradise Lost* Book X, he had “Satan fall like Lightning down from Heav’n” (184), at one with the divine weapon. When Gustave Doré engraved the epic in 1866, he went to the first report (1.44–45), the rebel angels zapped and zagged by a surprise of bolts they could not have foreseen.

Mindful of such divine technology, Olaudah Equiano writes about a cannonball attack on the ship where he was an enslaved crewman, Milton’s words close at hand:

“Wing’d with red lightning and imperious rage;
for with a most dreadful sound it hissed close by me, and struck a rock
at a little distance, which it shattered to pieces.

(*Interesting Narrative* 1.164)

Milton’s actual phrase is “impetuous rage” (*PL* 1.175). Equiano’s misremembered adjective accentuates the hell of earth’s imperial warfare, waged by no angels. In a later episode, smaller scale but still shattering, he fantasizes rage on his side. Swindled by some racist traders in a meager venture for capital to buy his freedom,

I now, in the agony of distress and indignation, wished that the ire of God in his forked lightning might transfix these cruel oppressors among the dead. (1: 238)

The thrill of witnessing is crucial. The third (and last) event of lightning in his *Narrative* supplies a language for his elation on gaining legal freedom from oppression:

All within my breast was tumult, wildness, and delirium! My feet scarcely touched the ground, for they were winged with joy, and, like Elijah, as he rose to Heaven, they “were with lightning sped as I went on.” (2: 16)

Not just a random simile, the quotation-marking evokes a scriptural generator.¹ Without even needing quotation marks, Shelley summoned the trope in the already divine mode of *Prometheus Unbound*: “Desire’s lightning feet” (p. 55; I.734). The implied twinning to poetic feet is explicit when he images “the Spirits of the human mind” emerging with “sandals of lightning on [their] feet” (p. 127; IV.90). Whether for astonishment, anger, justice, inspiration, or transport, Romantic-era lightning radiates from skyscape into a force-field for human imagination, the brain’s capacitor, expressed in poetic measure.

In Greek myth, and in Miltonic mythology, lightning is divinity's armory. Then came Franklin. In a realized Enlightenment, this human scientist caught lightning in a jar and quickly communicated his success to the Royal Society:

As soon as any of the thunder-clouds come over the kite, the pointed wire will draw the electric fire from them; and the kite, with all the twine, will be electrified; and the loose filaments of the twine will stand out every way, and be attracted by an approaching finger.

When rain has wet the kite and twine, so that it can conduct the electric fire freely, you will find it streams out plentifully from the key at the approach of your knuckle.

At this key the phial may be charged; and from electric fire thus obtained spirits may be kindled . . . and thereby the sameness of the electrical matter with that of lightning completely demonstrated.²

For all the electric fire, Franklin's report is a cheerfully (disconcertingly) cool "how-to" for professional vetting and everyday popular science. In 1802 twenty-four-year-old Humphry Davy was dazzling London audiences with a vision of modern science evolving from the "dim and uncertain twilight of discovery" to "the steady light of truth, which has shown the external world in its distinct forms, and in its true relations to human powers" (*Discourse . . . on Chemistry*, 19). His master-trope was patent-Franklin:

the phenomena of electricity have been developed; the lightnings have been taken down from the clouds; and lastly, a new influence has been discovered, which has enabled man to produce from combinations of dead matter effects which were formerly occasioned only by animal organs. (19)

Mary Shelley read these lectures and imprinted a secretive student's discovery of "the cause of generation" with a godlike boast of bringing a "torrent of light into our dark world" (I.III). His name was Franklin-kinned: Frankenstein.

The revolution in life-science wrought in secret by this student was set in November 1789, the year of the French Revolution and Equiano's *Narrative*.³ By 1798, Wordsworth made lightning autobiographical, imaging the "favor'd" forming of his boyhood consciousness as the work of "spirits"

with “the touch of lightning” (MS JJ R^r). Abolition, revolt, liberation, inspiration, divine commerce, and, not least, modern science and its technological dreams: Let there be Lightning.⁴ It charged Romantic-era imaginations with shocks to the system, vibrating from high promise to subtly modal fantasies and fevers, to radical transformations and unimaginable catastrophes.

“Lightning and the electric stroke”

Not for nothing is Shelley’s full title *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*. The French electrician Guillaume Mazéas heralded Franklin’s “discovery of that wonderful matter which Nature has kept hid from us since the creation of the world—The fable of Prometheus is verifyd—What after this can mortals find difficult?”⁵ No question: “Prometheus of modern times” was Immanuel Kant’s salute to “Herr Franklin” in 1756.⁶ He “first burst forth upon the philosophical world” (science), said Dr. John Coakley Lettsom in 1787, “and realized what the warm imagination of poets had ascribed to Prometheus” (486). It was the poetry of modern science, and scientists saw the poetry. The epithet was legion.⁷ The article “Electricity” in the 1810 *Encyclopædia Britannica* enrolled the fame: “Dr Franklin . . . truly realized the fable of Prometheus in bringing down fire from heaven.”⁸ In 1772 François Jean de Chastellux hailed “Mr. Franklin, nouveau Prométhée, sçut dérober le feu céleste, & le render docile à ses loix” (2: 87).⁹

This new Prometheus became political Prometheus. In 1791, the American Revolution won and the French Revolution inspired, scientist-poet Erasmus Darwin imaged Franklin daring to “seize the tiptoe lightnings,” as welcoming sky-spirits “wreath’d the crown electric round his head.” Crown is a potent metaphor, a new monarchy of science, not state: “Tyrant-Power” succumbs when “Immortal FRANKLIN” attacks; “The patriot-flame with quick contagion ran, / Hill lighted hill, and man electrised man.”¹⁰ Lightning endorses the justice of revolution. Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s *Au GENIE De FRANKLIN* (1778) blazed a motto, ERIPUIT CŒLO FULMEN SCEPTRUM QUE TIRANNIS.¹¹ Portly Franklin is robed with classical authority, apostle America calmly at his knee as he directs Mars’s vanquishing of Avarice and Tyranny—protected from electrocution by Minerva’s shield (a divine lightning rod).

Acceding to the political symbolism, antagonists tried to switch the positive and negative polarities. Richard Tickell’s *Anticipation* (1778) broadcast the



FIGURE 1.2. Marguerite Gérard, after Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *To the Genius of Franklin* (*Au Génie de Franklin*), 1778. This political revolutionary and scientific generator is posed, portly body wrapped in classical robes, to evoke the divinity of the modern age, goddess America at his knee as he directs Mars's vanquishing of Avarice and Tyranny—the forward-looking trio protected from lightning by Minerva and her shield (the first lightning rod).

“modern Prometheus, collecting fire from vapour to inflame the terrestrial mass by its pernicious infusion” (14n).¹² “When the National Assembly directed the electrical fluid of this popular phrenzy against the ancient fabric of their Monarchy,” said *The Antigallican* of France in 1793, it was with “fatal consequences” (19). Even Whig politician Lord John Townshend was alarmed,

producing a polemical revenge by sending this “modern Prometheus” into electrocution. Franklin shall

take a daring flight;
To heaven he mounts in chains of wire,
To perish by his stolen fire
Ty’d to a paper-kite.¹³

Not Equiano’s elation of liberty, this is a sarcastic burn on Elijah’s chariot of fire.

While the descent of the French Revolution into chaos was a caution, Franklin was a free radical not least because he was a careful scientist, a modern hero of industrious common sense, savvy diplomacy, civic benevolence, and practical virtue. Dr. Lettsom took pains to say “the fire which the enterprize of his great mind had snatched from heaven, he controlled; and rendered one of the most active and tremendous agents in nature, subservient to his direction, and to that of posterity” (486). Franklin was a prudent Prometheus, an upgraded life-guard:

—O FRANKLIN! here thy daring art,
Better PROMETHEUS, from the *pointed* rod,
Guides the terrific Lightning to moist Earth,
Innoxious: proves the correspondence full,
Between the Lightning and the electric stroke,
And teaches best against the dreaded blow
The towering edifice, and sacred life
Of man to guard. (*Eudasia* Book VI.656–63)

—so Capel Lofft praises the lightning rod in 1781, for safe transit from heaven to earth.

In 1816 American painter Benjamin West’s *Benjamin Franklin Drawing Electricity from the Sky* (in full color) arrays a lightning-lit brow, eyes on a far horizon, raised right arm, squad of disciplined cherubim. This is a divine genetics of human electricity, staged with Byronic éclat—wind-swept hair, cape, and neckcloth. But not reckless: the divine channeler is a figure of sober concentration, feet firmly, squarely grounded. This grounding matters because once the genii of lightning could be bottled, Franklin’s genius swung wide and wild.

Not everyone stayed grounded. The promise of lighting twinned to peril. In 1820 an optimistically titled *Endless Amusement; a Collection of Nearly 400*



FIGURE 1.3. Benjamin West, *Benjamin Franklin Drawing Electricity from the Sky* (ca. 1816). The key-wrangler gets a bit of Byronic glamour with a swirling cape and flowing neckwear. With his feet squarely on the earth, raised right arm, and visionary eyes, backlit by a lightning sky, and a squad of cherubim assistants, Franklin stages divine commerce in the birth of modern science.

Entertaining Experiments . . . so clearly explained, as to be within the reach of the most limited Capacity had more than a few fathers and sons entertaining its experiments with lightning and electricity (88–91), some ending as electrocuted human capacitors. Back in the heats of 1753, *Gentleman's Magazine*, and *Historical Chronicle* published three letters on “Fatal Effect of Electricity” (430–31): “We



FIGURE 1.4. John Ludlow Morton, “The Philosopher and His Kite; / *Designed Expressly for the Columbian Magazine*,” engraved by Henry S. Sadd, commissioned by *Columbian Magazine*, 1845. The intensely focused Franklin (“Philosopher” means scientist) seems careless of his son’s alarm from the tumult in the lightning-lit dark skies.

are come at last to touch the celestial fire, which, if thro’ our ignorance, we make too free with, as it is fabled *Prometheus* did of old, like him we may be brought too late to repent of our temerity.”¹⁴ This peril hovers over “The Philosopher & his Kite,” by John Ludlow Morton, 1845, for *Columbian Magazine*.¹⁵

While a companion essay gushes, “what a glorious experiment it was! What an impulse it gave in a moment, as it were, to the progress of scientific inquiry!”—it also notes “the forked lightning that gleams and blazes fearfully athwart the blackness of the tempest” (90). Philosopher Franklin’s intent focus on his project misses the chiaroscuro of thunder-clouds behind, a ravaged snaky-tree (evoking Eden’s serpent) to frame left, misses even the face of his fearful son.

Lightning was legion, but what does it speak, and what might it signify? Heaven, Hell, or sheer Indifference? In 1821 radical atheist Richard Carlile, tried for blasphemy for publishing Tom Paine's *Age of Reason*, spoke blasphemy again (said shocked reviews), as he stripped theology from science, issuing a pamphlet with a title tuned to enlightened atheism, progress, the next generation, and universal benevolence. The full title unfurls a manifesto:

An Address to Men of Science; Calling upon Them to Stand Forward and Vindicate The Truth from The Foul Grasp and Persecution of Superstition; And Obtain for the Island of Great Britain The Noble Appellation of The Focus of Truth; Whence Mankind Shall be Illuminated, and the Black and Pestiferous Clouds Of Persecution and Superstition Be Banished from the Face of the Earth; As the Only Sure Prelude to Universal Peace and Harmony Among the Human Race. In which a Sketch of a Proper System For the Education of Youth Is Submitted to Their Judgment.

He subscribed this address from "Dorchester Gaol, May 1821" (48). Even as this blazing banner of a title heralds a clearing of black and pestiferous clouds, Carlile's call to Men of Science ripples with a metaphysical tremor, the pages to follow evoking the capacity of a "galvanic battery" (Leyden jar in multiples) to obliterate all trace "of substance or solid matter," to expose in "the workings of Nature" the mindless currents of "the whole universe"—in rebuke to any human "pretension to the possession of supernatural powers" (8).

Byron's Brand: "This is my Lightning!"

Poetic power was another brand, and no one tapped lightning's complex chiaroscuro force-field more brilliantly, more theatrically, than Byron. He scoffed at Milton's arming the Almighty with lightning as superfluous to the force of divine will itself. With a bit of satire on the anti-atheists, Byron declared it "as absurd, (and in fact, *blasphemous*), in putting material lightnings into the hands of the Godhead, as in giving him hands at all."¹⁶ But he did not stint to lay his own hands on the poetic capital. The nearly jaded political tourist of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) rallies Spain to revive the ancient spirit of Chivalry, to hurl "blazing bolts" of resistance at Napoleon (I.XXXVII). Even boyish Don Juan feels such war-thrill: "his veins / Filled as with lightning" (*DJ* 8.33). When the "female Byron," L.E.L., took her turn, her agent was a hellbent Byronic pirate, Bona, declaring, "I come, as the lightning comes red from

above, / O'er the race that I loathe, to the battle I love." The analogy *as* layers simile with an endorsing simultaneity.

It scarcely matters who the antagonists are in the sublime charge. When Jehovah is in charge in William Sotheby's *Saul* (1807), "transient glimpses of the lightning flash / That sparkled on his armour" show Saul's "desperation" in flight (Part I, Book II, p. 53). Byron calls on lightning to blazon the hellscape "STANZAS" at the back of *Childe Harold I-II*. Says his headnote: "*Composed October 11th 1809, during the night; in a thunder storm, when the guides had lost the road. . .*" Byron renders the drama in the throbs of virtual real time:

Our guides are gone, our hope is lost,
And lightnings as they play,
But show where rocks our path have crost,
Or gild the torrent's spray.

Is yon a cot I saw, though low?
When lightning broke the gloom—
How welcome were its shade!—ah, no!
'Tis but a Turkish tomb. (pp. 171–72)

An apocalypse seems at hand: "Clouds burst, skies flash, oh, dreadful hour!" (p. 173)—*dreadful*, registering lightning in the mind, as fire and fatality.¹⁷

Two years on, 1814, this is the charge flashed from that strange pageboy Kaled in *Lara*.

And the wild sparkle of his eye seemed caught
From high, and lightened with electric thought. (I.xxvi)

The eye *lightened* with electric thought is *neuro-lightning*. So, too, Donna Julia's "transparent glow, / As if her veins ran lightning" (*DJ* 1.61), throbbing erotic physiology. For both, it is genetic destruction. Such Byronic heroinism (Kaled is cross-dressed in disguise) twins the male formation. For Conrad, the captured pirate in *The Corsair* (also 1814), psyche and sky converge in lightning. As "o'er his turret cell the thunder-cloud . . . flash'd the lightning by the latticed bar," he invokes this "genial" spirit to electrocute his gloom:

Close to the glimmering grate he dragg'd his chain,
And hoped *that* peril might not prove in vain.
He raised his iron hand to Heaven, and prayed
One pitying flash to mar the form it made:
His steel and impious prayer attract alike— (III.vii)

The prayer unanswered here, it blasts when he hears of the death of his beloved: "lightning cleaves the rock; / If such his heart, so shatter'd it the shock" (III.XXIII).

In *Childe Harold III*, published in the blaze of his fame, Byron scripts a sublime theater of lightning over Lake Geneva:

Now, where the quick Rhone thus hath cleft his way,
The mightiest of the storms hath ta'en his stand:
For here, not one, but many, make their play,
And fling their thunder-bolts from hand to hand,
Flashing and cast around: of all the band,
The brightest through these parted hills hath fork'd
His lightnings,—as if he did understand,
That in such gaps as desolation work'd,

There the hot shaft should blast whatever therein lurk'd. (xcv)

In a swell of syntax, with a dash to mime lightning's bolt, Byron charges a single sentence into the alexandrine's blast. The next stanza is a panoramic apostrophe to the theater so lit:

Sky—Mountains—River—Winds—Lake - Lightnings! Ye

This is the manuscript-text; Murray's editors tamed the dashes to commas.¹⁸ In the next stanza on the manuscript, a propulsion of dashes across reaches for the lightning-logos of one word:

*could I wreak
My thoughts upon Expression—and thus throw
Soul—heart—mind—passions—feelings—strong or weak—
All that I would have sought—and all I seek
Bear—know—feel—and yet breathe—into one word,
And that one Word were Lightning—I would speak:
But as it is—I live and die unheard
With a most voiceless thought—sheathing it as a sword.—*

Not really "unheard." If not one word, then a serial typography is the approximate mimetic. Where Shelley imagines a surreal "voiceless lightning" at Mont Blanc's unknowable summit, Byron's stanza would collapse voice into an evoked "voiceless thought," imaged as a sheathed *sword*, the lettering containing for potential release (and rhyme to it) the charged *word*. Finishing the stanza with a final dash, Byron's punctuation works as a sign system

for verbal inadequacy, then at the end, as a pointer to an infinity beyond wording.

From spark to shock, lightning had become such a Byron-brand that he leapt at Sotheby's seeming piracy of the *Corsair* stanza into *Ivan* (1814): "This is my Lightning!" he exclaimed.¹⁹ The provocation was Sotheby's pirating of *The Corsair*, Canto III, into *Ivan*:

The thunder as it burst upon my roof,
And beckon'd, to the lightning as it flash'd
And sparkled on these fetters: while in vain
I proffer'd, where the volley fiercely blaz'd,
My forehead to its death-stroke. (*Ivan* Act IV, scene I, p. 136)

Given such a massive stage for lightning-action, it is hard to say who has the patent, or copyright.²⁰ Byron's lightning magnetized a fraternity. Even his several heroes have no firm possession. In *Prometheus* (1816), Olympic "Thunderer" Jove is so shocked by the Titan's resistance that in his imperial "hand the lightnings trembled" (II). The self-torturing passions of "wild Rousseau" (later on in Canto III) get represented as self-inflicted lightning:

His love was passion's essence—as a tree
On fire by lightning; with ethereal flame
Kindled he was, and blasted. (LXXVIII)

The briefly suspended, triple-prepositioned line-unit "On fire by lightning; with ethereal flame" mirrors the coming double-predicate, "Kindled . . . and blasted." From love's passion to the "burning page" (LXXVIII), lightning is the destructive generator. Said Rousseau himself, "A sentiment takes possession of my soul with the rapidity of lightning, but instead of illuminating, it dazzles and confounds me" (*Confessions* Book III; 1: 206). Hazlitt saw this in Shelley: "he . . . was withered in the lightning-glare of a ruthless philosophy" (*Edinburgh Review*, 496).

Manfred (1817), written just after *Childe Harold Canto III*, takes such jolts into mainframe psycho-metaphysics. The "Promethean spark, / The lightning of my being," roils this hero's mortal clay (1.1.154–55). Byron first wrote "Spirit of my being," then ditched *Spirit* in favor of *lightning*, to torture the rapture (CPW 4: 8n). This was the genetic endowment of the Byronic hero, his stylistic currency. In 1819 Mazeppa recounts his fall into forbidden love, heart-sparks

that become cerebral lightning: "through my brain the thought did pass / Even as a flash of lightning" (*Mazeppa* 271–72); "that day of pain, / . . . lanch'd, as on the lightning's flash" (407–8). It was no stretch in 1821 for Shelley's *Adonais* to identify Byron by the "lightnings of his song" (xxx) and the electric circuitry these generated.

In his highest wrought passion, when every limb and muscle are alive and quivering, and his gestures hurried and violent, nothing appears ranted or overacted; because he makes us feel, that with all this, there is something still within him vainly struggling for utterance.

This could be any Byronic hero. It's Byronic celebrity actor Edmund Kean as Richard III, described by American theater critic Richard Henry Dana in 1821 (424).²¹

Byron lit up the affinity: "There is a new Actor named Kean," he wrote to a friend in February 1814; "he is a wonder . . . his style is quite new—or rather renewed—being that of Nature." (*BLJ* 4: 67); "this is a man of genius," he said to a person sitting next to him in the audience for Kean's *Iago* at Drury Lane in May (4: 115n1). Dana returned the energy in his Byronized language, as he described the insane rage of Kean's *Lear*: "wild as the winds that roared about him, and fiery and sharp as the lightning that shot by him" (427). Kean's acting is lightning-energy, a "triumph of mind over matter," wrote Byron to his courtship-target Anne Isabel Milbanke in October; "his figure is very little . . . but I never saw the Passions so expressed—on the stage at least," with a flirtatious wink (*BLJ* 4: 216). In *Mazeppa* (1819), he imagined passion in the trope of heart "sparks" (235–36) that become electric:

the burning chain that binds,
Without their will, young hearts and minds;
Conveying, as the electric wire,
We know not how, the absorbing fire.— (240–43)

The marriage itself never heated up. In 1821 Byron wrote to a now alienated Lady Byron, "the lightning perishes in the instant with the Oak which it strikes" (*BLJ* 8: 62).²²

William Hazlitt was left a little cold by Kean's *Iago*, too wittily wicked to admit any lightning: the "light which illumines the character should rather resemble the flashes of lightning in the mirky sky, which make the darkness more terrible," he wrote in a review, July 1814 (Byron would have read it).



FIGURE 1.5. Edmund Kean as Othello. Theater poster (1814–20), with all that metal, a virtual human lightning rod, demonically possessed.

Kean's Othello filled the bill. One poster shows him wielding a metal chain, tensed with metal bracelets, metal trimmings, brazen snake-sword, iron glare—a virtual lightning rod for the storms of love and war.

Said another theater-goer,

I saw Kean in . . . Richard the Third, and Othello, and can truly say, I felt as if I had never understood Shakspeare till then. I shall never forget the sort of electric light which seemed to flash across my mind from the burst of power he displayed.

This is Felicia Hemans, who saw this electricity in October 1820 and wrote to her sister about it (*W* 1: 42). To a friend she exclaimed it “was like reading Shakspeare by flashes of lightning.”²³ This terrific simile is usually credited to Coleridge, who was not averse to grabbing a good line when he heard it.²⁴ Hemans could well have cried out, “*This is my lightning!*”

With Kean's embodied stage-power in his head, Byron drew electric fire into his theater-piece, *Monody on the Death of The Right Honorable R. B. Sheridan*. Everyone thought that Kean was the perfect one to deliver its verbal electricity:

Breasts to whom all the strength of feeling given
Bear hearts electric—charged with fire from Heaven,
Black with the rude collision—inly torn,
By clouds surrounded, and on whirlwinds borne,
Driven o'er the lowering Atmosphere that nurst
Thoughts which have turned to thunder—scorch—and burst. (89–94)

Kean, alas, was unavailable.²⁵ Byron, however, had uncannily written the scene of his own death.

Instantaneously, “there was one of the awful thunder-storms I ever witnessed,” reported his fire-master, William Parry.

The lightning was terrific. The Greeks, who are very superstitious, and generally believe that such an event occurs whenever a much superior, or as they say, a supreme man dies, immediately exclaimed, “The great man is gone!” On the present occasion it was too true; and the storm was so violent, as to strengthen their superstitious belief. Their friend and benefactor was indeed dead. (128n)

“Byron himself might have been moved by such a portent,” said biographer Leslie Marchand (1230). Parry has it both ways, offloading the superstition to the Greeks while staging the portent for his readers. The sign in the heavens flashed across the media, print and visual.²⁶ Here is Mrs. Henry Rolls's version in her monody, “Death of Lord Byron” (1825):

And every ray of brightness fled,
Save where the lurid lightning gleamed (p. 14)

In a special sixteen-page newspaper supplement of tributes, an anonymous poet images, with pitch-perfect enjambment, Byron rousing the generals



FIGURE 1.6. Nicholas Eustache Maurin, lithograph after Richard Westall's *Byron* (1813), lightning added, June 5, 1824.

with “words of fire, that flew / Electric through the land” (“To Greece, on the Death of Lord Byron” 144). Within days of the fatal news reaching Paris, Richard Westall's *Byron at the Age of 25* (1813) got posthumously rified with lightning.

Byron is musing on the pages of *Childe Harold*, as if inspired by, or emanating, lightning, a metonymic relay of poetic effect and poetic cause.²⁷ How savvy of William Finden to add a lightning bolt to his 1835 engraving of the Albanian-Byron oil-portrait by Thomas Phillips (1813) for John Murray's new 1841 edition of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.²⁸ This was the incontestable attribute of his electric celebrity.



FIGURE 1.7. William Finden, engraving after Thomas Phillips's *Byron* (1813), lightning added.

The Shelleys' Lightning

Byron's signature was not exclusive. Celestial lightning has many beholders, actual and in imagination. I return to the Shelleys, who worked within but were not circumscribed by Byron's circuitry. "Power . . . comes down . . . Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame / Of lightning thro' the

tempest” writes poet Shelley in an ecstasy of metaphor (*Mont Blanc*, stanza 2) that bears the sensation of phenomenology so intensely that it seems to evoke what is imagined. This is the conflux he writes for Beatrice Cenci, just after she has been raped by her father, promising it won’t be last time. Like Equiano, she invokes lightning-power both for expression and remedy:

I shall go mad. Ay, something must be done;
What, yet I know not—something which shall make
The thing that I have suffered but a shadow
In the dread lightning which avenges it;
Brief, rapid, irreversible, destroying
The consequence of what it cannot cure.
(*The Cenci*, pp. 38–39; III.i, 86–91)

The medial dash is a pregnant pause before the imagination of lightning, in a heartbeat between a “not” and a “something” of apocalyptic violence. In August 1819, enraged by the attack on a peaceful workers’ demonstration at Manchester (“Peterloo”), Shelley shared this voice: “Something must be done . . . What yet I know not” (*L* 2: 117). It might be the political version of parricide that Beatrice is ideating.²⁹ If he didn’t invoke lightning for Peterloo justice, *Edinburgh Monthly Review* guessed it, igniting the trope for Shelley’s existential threat:

The lightnings of genius are, indeed, always beautiful, but it should be remembered, that although their business is to purify the air, they may easily, unless reason lift her conducting rod, be converted into the swiftest and surest instruments of death and desolation. In that case, the measure of the peril answers to the brightness of the flash. (May 1820; 3: 593)

It was the political fallout from Franklin, without a conducting rod.

Mary Shelley summoned this twinned charge into *Mathilda*.³⁰ The heroine describes the sudden collapse of her happiness with her father “as the stroke of lightning” (191); his eyes “glared on me like lightning” (194). She pleads for explanation, knowing the discharge will likely be fatal to them both. It is not rape, but father-love in erotic excess. Not yet knowing this, she cries:

do you think that I can live thus fearfully from day to day—the sword in my bosom yet kept from its mortal wound by a hair—a word!—I demand that dreadful word; though it be as a flash of lightning to destroy me, speak it. (201)

Sword to word: not the Alpine apocalypse Byron romanced in ecstasy, but a fatal conclusion, her father's suicide in lightning storm. As Mathilda tries to get to him "with the speed of lightning" (212), metaphor becomes event: "lightning lighted up the whole country" (213).

alone in a large meadow stood a magnificent oak; the lightnings shewed its myriad boughs torn by the storm. A strange idea seized me . . . "if the next flash of lightning rend not that oak my father will be alive."

I had scarcely uttered these words than a flash instantly followed by a tremendous peal of thunder descended on it; and when my eyes recovered their sight after the dazzling light, the oak no longer stood. (213)

It wasn't the first time that Shelley had set such a scene.

In *Frankenstein* (1818), she stages it to astonish Victor Frankenstein in boyhood and prefigure his adult ruin. At fifteen, he witnessed "a most violent and terrible thunder-storm":

I remained, while the storm lasted, watching its progress with curiosity and delight. As I stood at the door, on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump. . . . It was not splintered by the shock, but entirely reduced to thin ribbands of wood. I never beheld any thing so utterly destroyed.

The catastrophe of this tree excited my extreme astonishment; and I eagerly inquired of my father the nature and origin of thunder and lightning. He replied, "Electricity." (I.I)

"As Lightning to the Children eased / With explanation kind / The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind—," advises Emily Dickinson in the verse whose wisdom is "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—" (1263; ~1868). This is a bit of a jest about the force of explanation, especially retrojected to this scene in *Frankenstein*, where the father's origin-story plants the seed of his son's career toward lightning blindness. From this one word emanates dazzling light and utter destruction, as if innate in the receptor tree.³¹ *Frankenstein* is charged with lightning, as divine commerce, as reverberated destruction.

Shelley drew this drama from a storm that she watched on June 1, 1816, with Byron and P. B. Shelley.³² From the French side of Lake Geneva, they reveled at the tumult in the Swiss Alps across the water, "grander and more terrific than

I have ever seen before.” The enjoyment is keyed to distance and situational difference:

from the opposite side of the lake, observing the lightning play among the clouds in various parts of the heavens, and dart in jagged figures upon the piny heights of Jura, dark with the shadow of the overhanging cloud, while perhaps the sun is shining cheerily upon us. (*Six Weeks' Tour*, 99–100)

On just such distance between spectacle and spectator, Kant theorized the aesthetics of sublimity: “lightning flashes and thunder peals” are a pageant that is “the more attractive, the more fearful it is, provided only that we are in security.”³³ This proviso collapses when theater becomes threat, a transformation that Shelley records, as if in embarrassed correction of aesthetic distance: “The lake was lit up . . . and all the scene illuminated for an instant, and the thunder came in frightful bursts over our heads amid the darkness” (100).

In *Frankenstein*, young Victor’s shock at lightning-power gets managed by a more Franklin-tuned father. In a sequel, Frankenstein père “constructed a small electrical machine and exhibited a few experiments; he made also a kite, with a wire and string, which drew down that fluid from the clouds” (I.1). Shock to science in home-schooling, but for the undergraduate on his own at Ingolstadt, it is an intellectual thunderbolt:

from the midst of this darkness a sudden light broke in upon me—a light so brilliant and wondrous, . . . I became dizzy with the immensity of the prospect which it illustrated. (I.III)

P. B. Shelley supplied this dizzy sentence of mind-blowing illumination, in which an event of actual lightning would seem sheer redundancy (*FN* 1: 76–77). He must have shared with Mary Shelley his romance with electricity during his Oxford days. In his rooms (recalled college-mate T. J. Hogg in 1832), he set up an “electrical apparatus.” Shelley started “turning round the handle very rapidly, so that the fierce, crackling sparks flew forth; and presently standing upon the stool with glass feet, he begged of me to work the machine until . . . his long, wild locks bristled and stood on end” (*New Monthly* 34 [February]: 138). Literalizing Darwin’s “electrised man,” the enthusiast described by Hogg evokes a poster advertising T. P. Cooke in the part of the electrised Creature in *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein* (1823).

Shelley’s machine not only electrizes Shelley but also generates electrized speech: he “charged a powerful battery of several large jars; labouring with vast energy, and discoursing with increasing vehemence of the marvellous powers



FIGURE 1.8. “Mr. T. P. Cooke, of the Theatre Royal Covent Garden, in the character of the monster in the dramatic romance of Frankenstein.” Advertisement, *Presumption; or The Fate of Frankenstein*, by R. B. Peake, 1823. The Creature, though called “monster,” is rather spectacularly superhuman, to the stunned reaction of his creator.

of electricity, of thunder, and lightning,” Hogg recalls, seeming to relive the excitement two decades on. Multiplying Franklin’s instrument, Shelley projected “many kites, that would draw down from the sky an immense volume of electricity, the whole ammunition of a mighty thunderstorm; and this being directed to some point would there produce the most stupendous results”

(138). James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) realized just such a vision, as a manically Franklinitized (now professional) "Dr. Frankenstein" sends a flotilla of kites into a night storm to bring life-generating lightning down into a gothic laboratory.

Lightning is "voiceless" at the summit of Mont Blanc, "Remote, serene, and inaccessible" to human sensation (stanza 4). Grounded at Oxford, Shelley voiced electrical science with a fervor at once messianic and manic:

What a mighty instrument would electricity be in the hands of him who knew how to wield it, in what manner to direct its omnipotent energies . . . by means of electrical kites we may draw down the lightning from heaven! What a terrible organ would the supernal shock prove, if we were able to guide it; how many of the secrets of nature would such a stupendous force unlock! The galvanic battery is a new engine; it has been used hitherto to an insignificant extent, yet has it wrought wonders already; what will not an extraordinary combination of troughs, of colossal magnitude, a well-arranged system of hundreds of metallic plates, effect? (*New Monthly* 34 [January], 95)

Hogg conjures Shelley's visionary imagination as electrical sublime, mirrored in ever-expanding, galvanizing syntax. But not without a bleep of Franklin-sobriety: "if we were able to guide it . . . a well-arranged system." Surely a faint sequel to how Hazlitt described Shelley in April 1821, as a chaotic psychic battery, fueled more by egotism:

he is more intent upon startling himself with his electrical experiments in morals and philosophy; . . . I could wish that he would put a stop to the incessant, alarming whirl of his Voltaic battery . . . if he took less pleasure in feeling his heart flutter in unison with the panic-stricken apprehensions of his readers. ("On Paradox and Common-Place" 357)

This is the antithesis of Promethean benevolence.

Fully versed in Shelley's college-day enthusiasms, Mary Shelley doesn't bring lightning into *Frankenstein* where (in Whale, retro-activated) we might most expect it, the amination of the Creature. This is rendered into a quiet, nearly dreamlike suspense. As Victor stages the scene,

With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, 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. It was already one in the morning; the rain

pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. (I.IV)

It is not a sublime lightning in the sky but a spark of human science and its “instruments of life.” This event is tacitly so a-theological as to seem atheist. As Shelley was ideating *Frankenstein*, she was following the vitalist debates of her day: is life a divine spark or cellular reproduction? In 1800 Erasmus Darwin argued that “the new spark of being, or living entity” is biological (*Phytologia* 92). In 1804 Reverend Samuel Davies insisted that life was “the creative fiat of the Almighty,” striking the human soul with a “little spark of being” that “animates the machine of flesh” (Ser. 27, 2: 160).³⁴ Shelley’s scene, written in 1818 as William Lawrence (P. B. Shelley’s physician) and John Abernethy were debating this, leaves the event she located in the 1790s unsettled.³⁵ Her dramatic phrasing, “almost . . . to agony,” is an intensity of psychological investment and its embodied exertion, generated etymologically from *agon*.

Withholding lightning from this event allows Shelley to keep it in reserve, for a shock to illuminate to Frankenstein, during a midnight visit to “the spot where my poor William had been murdered,” the Creature whom he had abandoned nearly two years back (I.VI). Shelley stages this with that Kantian dynamic of distant spectacle and terrifying immediacy she watched across Lake Geneva. Looking fifty miles southeast from Geneva, recalls Frankenstein, “I saw the lightnings playing on the summit of Mont Blanc in the most beautiful figures,” as if a sublime enhancement for grieving. Aesthetic distance vanishes as the storm rapidly approaches; “thunder burst with a terrific crash over my head . . . vivid flashes of lightning dazzled my eyes, illuminating the lake, making it appear like a vast sheet of fire.” This is Milton’s hellscape, burning like “the Lake with liquid fire” (*PL* 1.229), but here no underworld. Rather, it brings the return of the repressed with a vengeance. What else appeared, “near me,” was a shadowy figure as if distilled from a nightmare:

I stood fixed, gazing intently: I could not be mistaken. A flash of lightning illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me . . . instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy dæmon to whom I had given life. (I.VI)

A jolt of “lightning illuminated” generates his Satanic torment. Lightning is now meta-narrative.

Writing Lightning

Ravenna—May 19th 1821: “There is a most rattling thunder-storm pelting away at this present writing—so that I write neither by day nor by candle nor torch light—but by lightning-light” (*BLJ* 8: 128). Lightning is Byron’s muse on retainer. As Shelley was working on *Frankenstein*, he was writing *The Lament of Tasso* (1817). Tasso’s tortured love abides,

Dwelling deep in my shut and silent heart
As dwells the gathered lightning in its cloud,
Encompassed with its dark and rolling shroud,
Till struck,—forth flies the all-etherial dart!
And thus at the collision of thy name
The vivid thought still flashes through my frame . . . (V, p. 13)

For Tasso, one name only charges his body electric. Byron was soon writing *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage Canto IV*. Here, lightning becomes plural and interconnective, “Striking the electric chain wherewith we are darkly bound” (xxiii):

And how and why we know not, nor can trace
Home to its cloud this lightning of the mind,
But feel the shock renew’d, nor can efface
The blight and blackening which it leaves behind,
Which out of things familiar, undesign’d,
When least we deem of such, calls up to view
The spectres whom no exorcism can bind,
The cold—the changed—perchance the dead—anew,
The mourn’d, the loved, the lost—too many!—yet how few! (xxiv)

The familiar pronoun “this lightning” speaks general psychology for Byronism. If origin has no *trace*, the shock waves cannot *efface* (a counterpointed rhyme) the bright and blackening residue, including the script on this shared page. This “electric chain” is a eulogy for Princess Charlotte, dead from childbirth in a “shock” to the nation. Through every “breast / Is linked the electric chain of that despair” (clxxii), this stanza the latest link.

In his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), Shelley writes such a link into a mainframe for the “uncommunicated lightning” that successive generations may realize (xi).³⁶ In a draft for *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), he described poetry as “a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it” (*EL* I: 24). This is not the sheathed sword of mind in *Childe*

Harold III or the inward agony of Tasso's cloud/shroud. Cast abroad, a poet's (in this case, Dante's) "very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor," contends Shelley as he rests his *Defence* (I: 40).³⁷

Has yet, but pregnant. Although Mary Shelley doesn't say so of herself, with *Frankenstein* (published January 1, 1818), she delivered. Its "lightning of the mind" was sparked by her own reading, generated its cast of characters, and generated the persona named on the dedication page, "Author." The cultural destination of the novel, ever expanding, hardly needs glossing. The reciprocal is its multiplicity of origins—electrical, and more.

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