**Book Section:**
Higgins, D and Somervell, T (2021) Catastrophe. In: Parham, J, (ed.) The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene. Cambridge Companions to Literature . Cambridge University Press , Cambridge , pp. 181-195. ISBN 9781108498531

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108683111.012

*Romanticism and Catastrophe*

*David Higgins and Tess Somervell*

When Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer outlined their newly coined term 'Anthropocene' two decades ago, they proposed a start date for the new geological epoch of 'the latter part of the 18th century', in part because it 'coincides with James Watt's invention of the steam engine in 1784.'[1] Since then, other start dates have been suggested, but if we accept that the Anthropocene is intertwined with the rise of what Andreas Malm calls 'fossil capital', then 1784 seems as plausible as any.[2] This essay argues that Romantic literature is Anthropocene literature in its concern with human-nonhuman entanglements and with what it means to be alive at a catastrophic turning point in planetary history.[3] As well as being characterised by increasing numbers of environmental catastrophes, such as extreme weather events and species extinctions, the Anthropocene is itself a catastrophe in the etymological sense, from the Greek *katastrophē* meaning an 'overturning' or 'sudden turn'. Its beginning, whenever that might have been, is a turn from the Holocene to a new geological epoch. This shift is also an epistemological catastrophe, a turning point in individual and cultural self-consciousness: the catastrophe of perceiving the catastrophe. Kate Rigby suggests that 'true catastrophes' are 'opportunities for deeper understanding and, potentially, new directions.'[4] However, Timothy Clark has argued that a catastrophe like the Anthropocene may preclude deeper understanding due to the 'derangement of given norms' that it produces.[5] Through readings of William Cowper's *The Task* (1785) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), we not only show how Romantic texts responded to specific environmental conditions but also how they evinced a catastrophically destabilizing shift in humanity's relationship with the more-than-human world.

The period first suggested as the start of the Anthropocene was also the period in which a geologic time scale was first formulated, due to developments in practical stratigraphy and the development of the concept of deep time. This was an epistemological

---

[1] Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, 'The Anthropocene', *IGBP Newsletter* 41 (May 2000), 17.
[2] Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London and Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2016).
[3] For a discussion of further ways in which Romantic literature can usefully be read as Anthropocene literature, see Thomas H. Ford, 'Punctuating History Circa 1800: The Air of Jane Eyre', in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, ed. Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 78-95.
[4] Kate Rigby, *Dancing With Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), p. 18.
[5] Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 195.

catastrophe (in the sense of a 'sudden turn') on a scale to match recent theorisations of the Anthropocene. Although catastrophist models of earth history – which understood past geological changes to be the results of dramatic, violent events such as floods, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes – had largely been superseded by the middle of the nineteenth century, they remained powerful in the Romantic period and were often used as literary tropes for reflecting on political revolution.[6] A number of texts central to the Romantic canon depict the present as an overturning in which both the natural and social orders undergo dramatic change and existing paradigms for understanding the planet and our relation to it are no longer sufficient. While it challenged older paradigms, Romantic literature also challenged modernity's tendency to separate nature and culture into separate ontological realms. According to Bruno Latour, this separation allows for a proliferation of hybrids that is simultaneously denied.[7] We argue that Cowper and Shelley, in different ways, address the complex natural-cultural entanglements that characterise the Anthropocene.

William Cowper wrote his six-book poem *The Task* (1785) in the wake of the 1783 eruption of the Lakagígar volcanic fissure in Iceland, which had deadly and far-reaching effects on the atmosphere. His employment of Christian tropes – apocalyptic imagery and weather events as divine punishment – demonstrates clear continuities with ostensibly secular discourse around climate change in the twenty-first century. He also makes use of the classical literary model of georgic, and its conventions for depicting changeable weather. Nonetheless, he emphasises the limitations of these Holocene paradigms for explaining the crisis or offering a solution to it. Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) was conceived and written during the climate crisis largely caused by the massive eruption of the Indonesian volcano Mount Tambora in 1815. If that novel is about human vulnerability to elemental forces, it is also concerned with our capacity to manipulate the elements and to create new and unpredictable natural-cultural hybrids. It may therefore be seen as an apt parable for the Anthropocene. However, like *The Task*, it does not offer easy solutions to complex problems. Both texts are sceptical of the capacity of existing modes of thought and behaviour to explain, let alone control, human-nonhuman entanglements; they are also sceptical that divine or technological miracles can solve the contemporary catastrophe.

---

[6] See Martin J. S. Rudwick, *Bursting the Limits of Time: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Revolution* (Chicag: Chicago University press, 2005), and Mary Ashburn Miller, *A Natural History of Revolution: Violence and Nature in the French Revolutionary Imagination, 1789-1794* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011).

[7] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

## *The Task* and the Unprecedented Anthropocene

As well as the first proposed start date for the Anthropocene, 1784 was the year that William Cowper completed *The Task*. It is an Anthropocene poem insofar as the objects of its critique are a catalogue of subjects that have been frequently identified as the epoch's defining features, including capitalism and consumerism, imperialism, the exploitation of animals, pollution, fossil fuels, and climate change. It is an Anthropocene poem, furthermore, in that it conceives of its historical moment as a turning point in planetary climate history. *The Task* depicts a catastrophic time, in which a past characterised by a (mostly) hospitable and predictable natural environment is giving (or has already given) way to a present characterised by a hostile climate and natural disasters. Tobias Menely identifies *The Task* as a 'sustained reflection on the obscurity of the present'. Developing his argument that 'Cowper came to regard the [contemporary] atmospheric turmoil as a symptom of modern time' and its radical difference from the past,[8] we explore the extent to which Cowper's articulation of this catastrophic turning point leaves space for a 'cure' for such symptoms of modernity, or for the underlying disease.[9] If the present belongs to a new age, what if any use do historical precedents and paradigms – including those that constitute his own poem – have in helping us to understand and respond? Cowper attempts to contextualise the catastrophic present in a longer timeline of natural, religious, and literary history, but questions whether the cultural strategies of the past are and will be still viable. He is sceptical that any existing paradigm of humanity's relationship with nature can explain or solve the present crisis. Between a past that offers no answers and an unknown future, the present catastrophic moment is one in which meaningful action stagnates.

1783-84 was a year of strange weather across the world. From February 1783 months of earthquake activity in southern Italy killed between thirty and fifty thousand. There were several volcanic eruptions, the most dramatic and deadly in its effects being that of the Lakagígar volcanic fissure in Iceland. The 'Laki' eruption lasted from 8th June 1783 till 7th February 1784, and released into the atmosphere around 120 million tonnes of sulphur dioxide that caused an aerosol veil to cover Europe in a thick, dry fog from June to winter

[8] Tobias Menely, '"The Present Obfuscation": Cowper's Task and the Time of Climate Change', *PMLA* 127.3 (2012), 477-92, 480.
[9] William Cowper, *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, reprinted 2002), vol.2, The Task, III.557. Subsequent references to *The Task* are to this edition, cited parenthetically by book and line number.

1783.[10] In Europe the summer of 1783 was extremely hot and stormy, and the winter of 1783-84 extremely cold.[11] Around a fifth of Iceland's population, and tens of thousands more across Europe, were killed as a result of poisoning or famine caused by the eruption. News of the eruption did not reach the continent of Europe until September 1783, and it was not immediately known to be the cause of the strange weather.[12] Thus *The Task* responds to climate change that Cowper does not know is neither permanent nor anthropogenic.

In Book II of *The Task* Cowper reflects on the weird weather and general sense of catastrophe:

> Sure there is need of social intercourse,
> Benevolence and peace and mutual aid
> Between the nations, in a world that seems
> To toll the death-bell to its own decease,
> And by the voice of all its elements
> To preach the gen'ral doom. When were the winds
> Let slip with such a warrant to destroy,
> When did the waves so haughtily o'erleap
> Their ancient barriers, deluging the dry?
> Fires from beneath, and meteors from above
> Portentous, unexampled, unexplained,
> Have kindled beacons in the skies, and th' old
> And crazy earth has had her shaking fits
> More frequent, and foregone her usual rest.
> (48-61)

Cowper's questions are an attempt to understand the changes in the climate by contextualising them within a longer narrative. He looks back through the history of the 'old' earth but finds no answers because the present is 'unexampled'. He alludes to the Deluge as a

[10] Thorvaldur Thordarson and Stephen Self, 'Atmospheric and environmental effects of the 1783-1784 Laki eruption: a review and reassessment', *Journal of Geophysical Research Atmospheres* 108.D1 (2003), AAC 7-1-AAC 7-29.
[11] G. R. Demarée and A. E. J. Ogilvie, 'Bons Baisers D'Islande: Climatic, Environmental, and Human Dimensions Impacts of the Lakagígar Eruption (1783-1784) in Iceland', in P. D. Jones, A. E. J. Ogilvie, T. D. Davies, and K. R. Briffa (eds.), *History and Climate: Memories of the Future?* (New York: Kluwer Academic, 2001), pp. 219-46, p. n228.
[12] Ibid., p. 220.

possible precedent, but later states, in his description of the earthquakes in Sicily, that 'Never such a sudden flood, / Upridged so high, and sent on such a charge, / Possess'd an inland scene.' (II.115-17) Cowper seems to be articulating 'the prospect of unprecedented change', which Zoltán Boldizsár Simon has argued is a defining experience of the Anthropocene.[13] He uses familiar tropes from Christian apocalyptic discourse, such as the phrase 'gen'ral doom' (a quotation from *Romeo and Juliet*, III.2.68; itself an allusion to Revelation 8-9). But they exist in a strange disjunction with the stated unfamiliarity of the present. In this way the passage relies on even as it disclaims continuities.

Whereas Simon argues that unprecedented change produces a 'demand for immediate and preventive action', for Cowper the lack of precedent paralyses.[14] He uses the weather to make the political argument that now is no time for disputes between humans, but he does not claim a causal relation between natural and political disorders. Peace is not said to offer any kind of solution to the sickening of nature, but only temporary comfort in the shared nature of the suffering: 'brethren in calamity should love' (II.74). The 'close of all' still seems to approach, regardless of human action (II.65).

In the lines that follow Cowper looks forward to a future that extends beyond this catastrophic moment, but is unable or unwilling to describe it in any detail:

> But grant her [the earth's] end
> More distant, and that prophecy demands
> A longer respite, unaccomplished yet;
> Still they are frowning signals, and bespeak
> Displeasure in His breast who smites the earth
> Or heals it, makes it languish or rejoice.
> (II.65-70)

Here Cowper finds an explanation for this catastrophic climate change. He invokes the 'punishment paradigm': the ancient theory that God controls the weather so as to reward or punish human behaviour.[15] While this 'way of making sense of calamities… began to wane in earnest with the rise of a mechanistic and atomistic view of matter during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries… Christian versions of the punishment paradigm persist[ed] well

[13] Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, 'Why the Anthropocene has no history: Facing the unprecedented', *The Anthropocene Review* 4.3 (2017), 239-45, 243.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Rigby, *Dancing With Disaster*, p. 3.

into the nineteenth century.'[16] Narratives of divine intervention are now more often associated with denials of anthropogenic climate change, but we can, nevertheless, recognise the punishment paradigm as an older model for understanding humans as a climatic force. It allowed Cowper to reassert the correlation between human action and climate.[17]

Accordingly, *The Task* utilises several existing models for understanding the interrelationship between nature and human culture, from Christian narratives of apocalypse and punishment to secular scientific explanations and other generic models such as georgic. But in the poem these old models repeatedly fall short of offering practical guidance for the 'unexampled' present and unknown future. Cowper's appeals to God's intervention quickly work to mystify as well as assert that correlation, and to diminish rather than increase the sense of human control over climate. As Menely suggests, 'what is illuminated by providential meteorology is the opacity of natural signs'.[18] 'Such evil sin hath wrought', Cowper states with confidence, implying that the earthquakes in Sicily are, at least in part, a 'judgment' of unjust imprisonment there (II.131-33); but shortly afterwards the sin is defined loosely as 'an atheist life' (II.180), and elsewhere even more broadly as 'guilt' or wickedness (II.155)). In Cowper's version of the punishment paradigm, which refuses to pinpoint one specific cause of the judgement, the global scale and multifaceted nature of the sin makes it unmanageable. All '[s]tand chargeable with guilt', and 'the less' guilty may be punished 'to warn / The more malignant.' (II.155-58)

Like political peace, faith is offered as a source of comfort rather than a solution to the present crisis. Cowper argues that perceiving God's hand in nature brings comfort and happiness, but although it 'resolves' 'good and ill' into God's will, it does not eliminate those ills themselves:

> Happy the man who sees a God employed
> In all the good and ill that chequer life!
> Resolving all events, with their effects
> And manifold results, into the will
> And arbitration wise of the Supreme.
> (II.161-65)

[16] Ibid.
[17] See Mike Hulme, *Weathered: Cultures of Climate* (London: SAGE, 2017) for a history of different cultures' conceptions of human behaviour as a climatic force.
[18] Menely, '"The Present Obfuscation"', 488.

This passage is Cowper's version of the 'Happy Man' set piece, a popular trope of georgic poetry based on examples by Virgil and Horace. As with the punishment paradigm, an idea or trope that we initially expect to demonstrate human control over nature is turned around to demonstrate lack of control. Whereas Virgil's Happy Man is 'he who can fathom the causes of things', including earthquakes and floods, Cowper's Happy Man knows the ultimate, divine cause rather than the natural one.[19] The georgic model, with its emphasis on the promise and satisfaction of empirical knowledge, is no longer sufficient, and its trope about the pleasures and powers of natural science is twisted to make the point that knowledge of the cause is not knowledge of the solution. Cowper mocks 'the spruce philosopher' who tells 'of causes how they work… their sure effects' (II.189-92):

> He has found
> The source of the disease that nature feels,
> And bids the world take heart and banish fear.
> Thou fool! will thy discov'ry of the cause
> Suspend th' effect, or heal it?
> (II.193-97)

Cowper does not offer a clear political, moral, or spiritual solution to the catastrophe, but he is confident that science does not offer a solution either. Cowper is not straightforwardly anti-science, but like Shelley, as we discuss in the second half of this chapter, he is sceptical about its curative capacity and suspicious that it fosters an arrogant and complacent notion of human power over nature.[20]

In Book III, Cowper continues to subvert his generic model of georgic, as with the punishment paradigm shifting the emphasis from human control to human powerlessness in the face of external forces that they have influenced but cannot manage. He describes the frivolous but difficult task of growing cucumbers in his garden, and concludes:

> It were long,
> Too long to tell th' expedients and the shifts
> Which he, that fights a season so severe

[19] Virgil, *The Georgics: A Poem of the Land*, trans. Kimberly Johnson (London: Penguin, 2009, reissued 2010), p. 69.
[20] For an in-depth introduction to Cowper's ambivalent views on science, see Harry P. Kroitor, 'Cowper, Deism, and the Divinization of Nature', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21.4 (1960), 511-26.

> Devises, while he guards his tender trust,
> And oft, at last, in vain. The learn'd and wise
> Sarcastic would exclaim, and judge the song
> Cold as its theme, and like its theme, the fruit
> Of too much labor, worthless when produced.
> (III.558-65)

Georgic has always incorporated an acknowledgement of nature's hostility and the risks associated with human dependence on climate. But it is essentially a Holocene genre: its instructions are premised on a mostly stable and moderate climate, which is changeable but at least predictable, and even its extremes have been seen before. Cowper's discussion of the likely failure of the cucumber-grower is within the conventions of georgic – albeit with a particularly heightened emphasis on the lack of solutions: 'Heat and cold, and wind and steam… oft work / Dire disappointment that admits no cure' (III.554-57). The real rejection of the georgic model comes when Cowper adds to the failure of the grower the failure of the poem to provide worthwhile instruction. The final lines invite comparison between the cultivation of the cucumber and the construction of the poem, depicting both as products of labour and as commodities: 'the poem-as-luxury-item', as Kevis Goodman puts it, '—*The Task* as giant cucumber.'[21] Book III closes with a reflection on the inefficiencies and inequalities of modern agriculture, casting a damning light back upon the waste of labour that went into Cowper's gardening: growing cucumbers for the town while '[t]he country starves' (III.757). This waste of labour is also the waste of labour of writing *The Task*: writing poetry while Sicily burns.

In *The Task* no existing paradigm for humans' relationship with the natural world offers an explanation for the present, or guidance to effect a desirable future. The result is a poem that advocates stasis rather than action, and itself occupies a kind of nervous stasis, constantly unclear in its 'task' and unwilling to commit to one theme or genre. This state resembles Clark's description of the effects of recognising the Anthropocene: 'a kind of inertia or potential paralysis'.[22] At the end of the poem Cowper returns to the georgic Happy Man who had been advised in Book II to look for spiritual consolation rather than natural causes. Now he is '[n]ot slothful… though seeming unemployed, / And censured oft as

[21] Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 104.
[22] Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, p. 15.

useless.' (VI.928-29) Cowper then suggests that he might have a use, in the ability to bring about better weather through prayer: 'Perhaps she [the world] owes / Her sunshine and her rain, her blooming spring / And plenteous harvest, to the pray'r he makes' (VI.945-47). Menely argues that this demonstrates that 'As the poem ends, Cowper is more confident about his capacity to influence the seasons… than he is about his capacity to recognize the prevailing weather. The weatherman has become a weather maker.'[23] But the doubt in that 'Perhaps' rises as the poem continues to its close:

> In vain the poet sings, and the world hears,
> If he regard not, though divine the theme.
> 'Tis not in artful measures, in the chime
> And idle tinkling of a minstrel's lyre
> To charm His ear, whose eye is on the heart[.]
> (VI.1018-22)

The 'idle tinkling' of poetry offers no solutions, but the outcomes of the poet's life and the current political, social, and ecological catastrophes are still said to be dependent on God who is driven, ultimately it seems, by the human 'heart'. What kind of behaviour will be rewarded with good weather, however, the poem has already failed to reveal; it has only asserted that a change in human behaviour, at a global scale, is necessary to mitigate, if it cannot halt, the current climate catastrophe.

## *Frankenstein* and the 'Good Anthropocene'

Around thirty years after Cowper wrote *The Task* in the strange atmosphere created by the Laki eruption, Mary Shelley began work on *Frankenstein* during the 'Year Without a Summer' of 1816. Like Cowper, she did not not know the origin of the unusual weather conditions, but they had a significant impact on her writing. Modern versions of the *Frankenstein* story tend to follow a traditional understanding of the novel as a warning against the dangers of anthropocentricism. In this reading, *Frankenstein* criticises scientific attempts to manipulate nonhuman nature without paying due attention to the risks involved,

[23] Menely, '"The Present Obfuscation"', 488.

and suggests that there are boundaries that our technologies should not cross. Bruno Latour has argued for a very different interpretation of the novel. Victor Frankenstein's crime, 'was not that he invented a creature through some combination of hubris and high technology, but rather that he abandoned the creature to itself'. The lesson, therefore, is that, rather than trying to limit our effects on the environment, we should take responsibility for those effects; we should continue 'innovating, inventing, creating, and intervening', and show 'the same type of patience and commitment to our creations as God the Creator, Himself'.[24] This may be a reasonable intellectual position, and is consistent with Latour's argument in *We Have Never Been Modern* that modernity represses its reliance on hybrids by understanding nature and culture as separate. However, it is a reductive reading of the novel. *Frankenstein* endorses neither an anti-technological agenda nor humanity's supposed elevation to the role of 'God species'. Rather, it challenges utopian ideas about scientific progress while also suggesting that returning to a more 'primitive' state is itself a fantasy. It therefore speaks to some of the tensions that trouble Anthropocene thinking.

Latour's interpretation was published under the title 'Love Your Monsters' in the online journal of the Breakthrough Institute, a think tank based in California. The Institute describes itself as 'a global research center that identifies and promotes technological solutions to environmental and human development challenges'.[25] Its mission statement suggests 'that human prosperity and an ecologically vibrant planet are not only possible, but also inseparable', and describes its 'unique approach' as 'rooted in a positive, optimistic paradigm called ecomodernism'.[26] The signatories of 'An Ecomodernist Manifesto' are all closely associated with Breakthrough. Latour is not among them; indeed, he has been critical of ecomodernism.[27] However, his article on *Frankenstein* supports the manifesto's aspiration that a 'good Anthropocene demands that humans use their growing social, economic, and technological powers to make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural world'. Ecomodernism, in effect, wants us to double down on the Anthropocene by embracing our power as a species to shape the world. It sees technologies such as 'urbanization, agricultural intensification, nuclear power, aquaculture, and desalination' as interventions that will reduce environmental degradation and improve human life.[28] It

[24] Bruno Latour, 'Love Your Monsters', *Breakthrough Journal* 2 (2011) <https://thebreakthrough.org/journal/issue-2/love-your-monsters> (accessed 5 April 2019).
[25] <https://thebreakthrough.org/about> (accessed 5 April 2019).
[26] <https://thebreakthrough.org/about/mission> (accessed 1 May 2018).
[27] <http://bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/00-BREAKTHROUGH-06-15_0.pdf> (accessed 5 April 2019).
[28] https://ecomodernistmanifesto.squarespace.com/ (accessed 5 April 2019).

therefore offers a narrative of hope rather than the narrative of loss associated with other forms of environmentalism, which tend to see global capitalism, at least in its current form, as part of the problem. Thus Ian Angus suggests that the Breakthrough Institute 'consistently couples a professed concern for the environment with rejection of actual pro-environmental policies, on the grounds that new technology, growth and capitalism are the only solution to all environmental concerns'.[29] According to Angus, rather than understanding the Anthropocene as a severe crisis in the Earth system caused by industrial capitalism, Breakthrough members present it simply as a continuation of the human manipulation of the environment over many millennia and therefore not really a crisis at all.

Victor Frankenstein can be understood as a prototypical ecomodernist. He is thrilled by the prospect of harnessing the power of electricity, first brought home to him by viewing what he describes as the 'catastrophe' of an oak tree destroyed by lightning.[30] He is optimistic about the potential of technology to improve the world and ascribes to it a kind of magical power. He is partly inspired by a 'panegyric' on modern scientists delivered by one of his university tutors: '[They] have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places. […] They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers' (29). As Anne K. Mellor has influentially argued, this language draws on scientific discourse in the early nineteenth century; its characterisation of 'nature' as a woman to be penetrated suggests an aggressively masculine desire to impose human will on to the world (355-368). Victor's ambition is to defeat death itself, not only by creating a 'new species' from apparently 'lifeless matter', but also by learning how to 'renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption' (33). His reasons for pursuing this project are presented as a curious mixture of the rational – a desire to benefit future generations – and an emotional obsession: 'I pursued my undertaking with unremitting ardour […] a resistless, and almost frantic impulse, urged me forward' (33). The explorer Robert Walton, within whose letters the story of Frankenstein and his creation is framed, similarly combines rational and emotional aspirations. He emphasises 'the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation' (8), but he is also a poetic fantasist. Both men are seemingly blind to the catastrophic consequences of their endeavours: as reflected in Victor trying to return to his normal life once the Creature has been animated (also a 'catastrophe' (35), according to Victor) and in Walton refusing to turn back even

[29] Ian Angus, 'Hijacking the Anthropocene', 19 May 2015 <https://climateandcapitalism.com/2015/05/19/hijacking-the-anthropocene>/ (accessed 5 April 2019).
[30] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*, ed. John Paul Hunter (New York: Norton, 2012), p. 24. Subsequent references to *Frankenstein* are to this edition, cited parenthetically.

though half his crew have died. Given that, by pursuing their dreams of a better world, both characters end up destroying the people around them, it seems reasonable to suggest that Mary Shelley is wary of the Enlightenment utopianism apparent in the writings of her father William Godwin and husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, which shows a deep faith in the perfectibility of humanity even while it rejects the traditional apparatus of religion. Ecomodernism can be understood as the latest iteration of this utopianism, with even apparently secular groups such as the Breakthrough Institute having a quasi-religious belief in the eventual triumph of 'Progress'.

The Creature's narrative lies at the centre of the novel and presents a kind of counterpoint to Walton's and Victor's schemes. Rather than imposing his will on to the world, he seeks only the sympathy of others and, when this proves impossible, to find somewhere free of human influence:

> I will go to the vast wilds of South America. My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid, to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment. My companion will be of the same nature as myself, and will be content with the same fare. We shall make our bed on dried leaves; the sun will shine on us as on man, and will ripen our food. The picture I present to you is peaceful and human. (102-103)

This is exactly the sort of primitivism that ecomodernists lambast. It presents an ideal of 'wild' untouched nature that offers a refuge from the problems of modernity and, in the Creature's case, the cruel treatment that he receives from humanity. It also offers an ecocentric view of mutual co-existence with nonhuman creatures based on a vegan diet. The Creature implies that his vision is more authentically 'human' than the modern world; resembling the 'state of nature' celebrated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose works have a major influence on *Frankenstein*.[31] However, by the time that he presents this vision to Victor, the Creature has already discovered fire. He therefore has access to a source of energy that – unlike the sun's rays – he can manipulate and control, and has experienced the benefits of this technology.

[31] For a useful early ecocritical discussion of *Frankenstein* and Rousseau, see Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), chapter 2.

After being rejected by his creator, the Creature, in a state of confusion and pain, spends several days wandering around a forest. Eventually he finds a 'fire which had been left by some wandering beggars':

> [I] was overcome with delight at the warmth I experienced from it. In my joy I thrust my hand into the live embers, but quickly drew it out again with a cry of pain. How strange, I thought, that the same cause should produce such opposite effects! I examined the materials of the fire, and to my joy found it to be composed of wood. I quickly collected some branches; but they were wet, and would not burn. I was pained at this, and sat still watching the operation of the fire. The wet wood which I had placed near the heat dried, and itself became inflamed. I reflected on this; and, by touching the various branches, I discovered the cause, and busied myself in collecting a great quantity of wood, that I might dry it, and have a plentiful supply of fire […] I found some of the offals that the travellers had left had been roasted, and tasted much more savoury than the berries I gathered from the trees. (71-72)

It is hard to imagine a more innocent account of scientific experimentation. Unlike Walton and Victor, the Creature is not trying to change the world with technology, but simply to make his own life a little more bearable. Through trial and error, he learns to master fire and traverses the boundary between energy regimes (solar and biomass, respectively). However, as with the energy transitions experienced by *homo sapiens* – which potentially includes Victor's discovery of the principle of life – the technology that makes life more comfortable also brings with it the potential for catastrophic change. When he is rejected by the family whom he has spent several months observing, he burns down their cottage. And it is fitting that his chosen method of suicide is through fire, as he tells Walton: 'I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames' (161). It seems unlikely, therefore, that the Creature would really be able to resist the temptations of fire in his South American paradise. And would the 'lamb and the kid' be safe from him and his companion, now that he has learnt of the 'savory' taste of cooked meat?

The novel never makes it to the 'wilds of South America'. It offers instead a kind of parody of that utopian vision of the state of nature when Victor travels to 'one of the remotest of the Orkneys'. In this 'desolate and appalling landscape', he is able to find the solitude that he requires in order to make the Creature a companion (117). As he comes close to completing his task, he reflects on the risks involved and particularly the idea that a new

species might be propagated that would threaten the existence of humanity. When he sees the Creature observing his labours, he is overcome with 'a sensation of madness' and, 'trembling with passion', tears apart the body of the Creature's companion (119). This language suggests, as with the initial creation, that Victor's apparently rational reasons for acting as he does are in the service of motives that are much more obsessive and pathological. The novel's problem is certainly not with science *per se* – Mary Shelley was very much a child of the Enlightenment – but may well be with a science that lacks reasonableness. In the introduction to the 1831 version of the novel, she associates Victor's experiment with an attempt 'to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world', which suggests that technology should not seek to cross divinely-set boundaries (168). However, this claim does not reflect the unruly energies and intellectual excitement of the 1818 version of the novel, from which God is notably absent. Even after the suffering that their actions have led to, Walton and Victor refuse to take the obvious moral lesson from their experiences. Shelley's novel is certainly alert to the unintended consequences of technology and the dangers of utopian thinking. But Victor's and Walton's unwillingness to let go of their hopes suggests, like the Creature's discovery of fire, that Shelley sees catastrophic change as an unavoidable part of human culture.

That is not say that such change can only take us in one direction. Thinking about the Anthropocene genealogically has the value of showing its history as contingent rather than inevitable. Fire becomes a destructive force in the Creature's hands because of his sense of alienation, not because of the nature of fire; the current hegemony of carbon capitalism is primarily due to political, economic, and cultural factors rather than technological 'progress' or the nature of fossil fuels. Latour's argument that we should embrace catastrophic technologies is a powerful one, but it may also distract from the socio-political overturnings required at a time of climate catastrophe.[32] *Frankenstein* offers a more nuanced approach than he suggests. In its complex portrayal of the Creature as a marginalised other, it asks us to be wary of invocations of humanity as a unified agent, given the inequalities that drive, and are driven by, catastrophic change. Moreover, the novel also shows how difficult it can be to control our technologies, even if we wish to do so. For when one reads the myriad of statistics and reports reflecting our Anthropocene catastrophe, it is hard to share the ecomodernists' optimism about our capacity to make well-managed interventions to the

[32] Andreas Malm, *The Progress of this Storm* (London: Verso, 2018), pp. 153-56.

Earth's systems. We live on a volatile planet and the idea that we can shape it to our whims is a fantasy.[33]

Cowper likewise understands climate change in relation to political, economic, and cultural factors and he calls for individual and social transformation. But in *The Task*, as in *Frankenstein*, any optimism in perceiving the contingency of the Anthropocene is undercut by the scale and complexity of the problem, and by our limited capacity to comprehend it. Both texts, therefore, present the Anthropocene as an epistemological crisis. While it draws heavily on Christian apocalyptic tropes, *The Task*'s sense of paralysis is ultimately more akin to secular catastrophism. Similarly, *Frankenstein* mounts a catastrophic *reductio ad absurdum* of the quasi-religious technological utopianism most recently adopted by the ecomodernists. In doing so they articulate our current position: still at a turning point, part of the same continuous catastrophe that has extended, so far, over at least two centuries. We seem unable to progress, with any meaningful action stymied by the magnitude, variety, and unruliness of the hyperobject of global environmental change. They remind us that paradigms that attempt to explain our catastrophic present and future, and those which offer solutions to it, whether technological or poetic, may in fact be part of the problem. Gloomy as that may sound, it is perhaps a necessary precondition for finding a better way of doing things.

[33] Nigel Clark, *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* (London: Sage, 2011).