

The Shelleys on Lake Como

by **Pietro Berra**

A slender common thread links the very first of the “living dead” to become a literary and cinematic sensation - the “creature” in *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* - to Lake Como, on the shores of which *Noir in Festival* first appeared in 2016. The lake that Virgil called by another name in his *Georgics* - ‘il massimo Lario’ - is a treasure trove, brimming with legends and mysteries evoked by its remarkable depth, over 400 meters; its mountain slopes that plunge almost virtually into its waters; and the fairy-tale villas that stud its shores. For centuries, the lake has been a magnet for artists (from the sublime William Turner to the dilettante painter Winston Churchill), filmmakers (from Alfred Hitchcock to George Lucas) and writers (such as Mark Twain and the Shelleys of our title).

Two hundred years ago, the masterpiece written by the twenty-year-old wife of Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, was published in London. It has never ceased to inspire writers and filmmakers ever since, but its publication was no mean feat, given the hurdles it had to overcome. The first edition came out anonymously, some believe by decision of the author herself, fearful of a scandal that could put her custody of her children at risk, while others (including the woman director Haifaa al-Mansour, in her recent film *Mary Shelley*) attribute it to the publishers’ prejudice against a young female novelist.

In any case, the publication of the novel reunited Godwin with the love of her life after they had drifted apart, and together, Mary and Percy decided that another journey would be the solution to all their problems. On March 11, 1818, the Shelleys set off on a ‘Grand Tour’ to Italy, with a stop at Lake Como itself, where they tried and failed to recreate a literary salon with their talented if dissolute friends, like the one they had started two years earlier on another lake in another land, Lake Lemano, or Lake Geneva. There, at the Villa Diodati, during the “haunted summer” of 1816 - when the unnaturally cold weather, one would later learn, was actually caused by the eruption of a volcano in the Indian Ocean - Mary, as is well known, had conceived of the idea for her *Frankenstein*, after a night spent reading ghost stories with her future husband, her stepsister Claire, Lord Byron and his physician John Polidori (who, on the same night, was inspired to write his own book *The Vampyre*, which would launch another iconic literary and film character in the gothic/horror vein).

No, the Shelleys’ arrival on the shores of Lake Como was no accident, considering that the area had also spawned Pliny (Elder and Younger) and a third illustrious native son, the inventor of the battery, Alessandro Volta, all three eminences of the cultural landscape that gave us *Frankenstein*. The novel itself provides a few clues. In the second chapter, the doctor of the same name, still a teenager, is shocked (if only metaphorically) by the sight of a tree turned to ashes by lightning, and even more so by his father’s explanation: “‘Electricity,’ he replied, and showed me on the spot the various effects of this energy. He built a small electric machine and had to observe several experiments; he also built a kite with a metal wire and a spring, which would attract this fluid from the clouds”. Impressed by these scientific experiments, the young man gave up studying the naturalists from earlier times, whom, he claimed, “had long ruled his imagination”, making an exception for just two: “Pliny and Buffon”, giants of the first and eighteenth centuries, whom he considered “as useful as they were interesting”.

Electrical experiments quite similar to those of Doctor Frankenstein - the details of which

Mary avoided getting into in her novel, so as to prevent, she explained, someone else from imitating the disastrous procedure the doctor had devised - were actually being carried out in London in the first decade of the 1800s. Here Giovanni Aldini, physician and jurist from Bologna, found fertile ground; he was the nephew of Luigi Galvani, party to a celebrated dispute with Volta ten years earlier, over the origin of electricity: with the former claiming an animal origin, which he had deduced from experiments on dead frogs that contracted their limbs in reaction to a stimulus, while the latter said the origin was chemical, as he would prove definitively in 1799, when he created the first battery consisting of discs of zinc and copper separated by layers of felt soaked in sea water and sulphuric acid. Aldini would combine the discoveries of both scientists and conduct demonstrations in city streets that were undeniably grisly but also quite popular all across Europe. He would substitute cadavers for his uncle's frogs, transmitting electrical impulses using one of Volta's large voltaic piles.

Indeed, it was the search for the perfect corpse, or at least one that was intact, that brought Aldini to England in the first place; there the death penalty was by hanging, while in other countries it was decapitation. Aldini found his ideal body in the jails, that of one George Forrest, who was, however, inconveniently alive and awaiting trial on the charge of murdering his wife and daughter. It seems that the scientist bribed the judges to speed up the procedure. Hence on January 17, 1803, in the Royal College of Surgeons, before a stunned audience, Aldini sent 120-volt shocks through the corpse of poor Forrest; the papers of the day reported that the young man was seen briefly to come to life again. That is, his lungs resumed breathing and his heart beating, but then this forerunner of Frankenstein detached his cables, since they were useless in the face of brain death. However, seeing as Aldini's assistant would promptly die of a heart attack that very night, there were rumors that in the privacy of his own laboratory the scientist had continued the experiment, managing to levitate the corpse and literally scaring his helper to death. In 1807, in London, Aldini published a study (*An Account of the Late Improvements in Galvanism*) in which he advanced the claim that under specific conditions it was indeed possible to "resuscitate the dead" by means of electricity.

If the triumvirate Volta, Galvani and Aldini provided the "scientific" inspiration for *Frankenstein*, it was Pliny the Elder who did the honors on the "philosophical" front. Percy Shelley himself had translated the first book of Pliny's seminal work in English - being that 37-volume *Natural History* that constitutes the oldest encyclopaedia to come down to us - and had numbered this work among the foundations of his "scandalous" essay "The Necessity of Atheism", which had gotten him expelled from Oxford. "The enlightened and benevolent Pliny," wrote Shelley, with his own take on the Latin text (and context, above all) - but the city of Como outdid Shelley, placing the two Plinys on either side of the portal to the cathedral - "thus publicly professes himself an atheist, in these words: 'But it is the special consolation of imperfect human nature, that God indeed cannot do all things. For neither can he call death to his own relief, should he desire it - a noble refuge which he has given to man in the midst of so many evils; nor can he endow man with immortality, or call back the dead, etc.; by which things the power of nature is doubtless declared, and that is what we call God.'"

Respect for the limits imposed on man by nature is one of the key concepts underlying Pliny's *Natural History*, and earns him the title of "environmentalist before his time". Those who do not respect the limits commit sacrilege and shall pay the price. "We trace out all the fibres of the earth, and live above the hollows we have made in her, marveling that occasionally she gapes open or begins to tremble - as if forsooth it were not possible that this may be an expression of the indignation of our holy parent!", Pliny writes, referring to

the 'Gold Rush'. And Pliny's encyclopaedia helpfully provided Mary Shelley's fervent imagination with an impressive sampling of monstrous creatures who "were said" to exist at the time (this being the author's prudent formula whenever he was not sure of a fact), such as the one-legged Skiapods or the headless Blemmyae, sporting eyes and mouths on their chests.

That said, in the summer of 1818 on Lake Como, the Shelleys were mostly on the trail of Pliny the Younger, whose entire correspondence, Mary tells us in her diaries, Percy had read over the "haunted summer" of 1816 at Villa Diodati. It's no coincidence, then, that on the shores of Lake Como the literary spouses chose another villa that was even more gloomy and intriguing than the one in Geneva, and invited Byron to stay with them for the summer: the Villa Pliniana (Pliny's Villa) in Torno, as it is known due to a then mysterious spring that came and went - studies on karstic phenomena have since revealed the trick - described by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*, and by his nephew in a letter to Lucius Licinius Sura (not to mention even by Leonardo da Vinci in his *Leicester Codex*).

Percy Shelley also started writing letters to his friends after staying at the Villa Pliniana. In the volume of the Meridiano series *Teatro, prose e lettere*, published by Mondadori last October, there is a letter dated April 20, 1818 to Thomas Love Peacock, in which Shelley says of Lake Como that "it surpasses in beauty almost any other place I have seen, with the exception of the islands of Killarney with their strawberry trees", then launches into a paean to what he felt was the crowning glory of this paradise: "The most beautiful scenery is that of the Villa Pliniana, so-called owing to a fountain in the courtyard in which the level of the water rises and falls every three hours, and was described by Pliny the Younger. We are trying to rent this very house, once a magnificent abode, now practically in ruins. It is built on a series of terraces that climb up from the lakeshore, and its gardens are overlooked by a semi-circular cliff shaded by thick chestnut woods. The view from the colonnade is the most extraordinary and at the same time most gracious that one has ever laid eyes on. On one side, there's the mountain and just above it astonishingly tall cypress trees that seem to pierce the sky. And even higher than that, a waterfall of an enormous size appears to plunge from the clouds, only to break up on the rocky, wooded slopes into hundreds of streams that fall into the lake. On the other side, one can see the blue surface of the lake and more mountains splashed by sailboats and dotted with steeples."

Even more interesting, although not included in this collection, is the letter Shelley wrote to Lord Byron from Milan, dated April 13th. Percy informed his fellow poet friend that he and Mary had "just come back from Lake Como, where we'd gone to look for a house for the summer." He added, "If you have never traveled to see this sublime, adorable scenery, I think it would be worth the effort," and then made his invitation "How would you like to spend a few weeks with us there this summer?" He assured Byron that "our way of life is the same as always, as you remember it from Geneva, and the location we are considering (the Villa Pliniana) is in a solitary setting, surrounded by a majestic landscape, with the lake at our feet. If you choose to come - and I don't know where you could find a warmer welcome - your little Allegra could come with you."

Allegra was Byron's daughter, born on January 12, 1817 from his relationship with Claire, Shelley's sister-in-law. Byron did not admit to being her father until a few months later, when he agreed to raise the baby, only to entrust her to other families and eventually a Capuchin convent in Bagnacavallo (near Ravenna), where the little girl would die of malaria at the age of five. In his letter, Shelley described the child as being in "excellent health and spirits, with eyes as blue as the sky above our heads." He ended the missive to his friend by saying that the child's mother, Claire "has asked me if you have received the

lock of Allegra's hair that she sent you last winter."

The summer would not turn out as planned. The literary couple would not succeed in renting the Villa Pliniana (certain translators claim that they even wanted to buy it, in an alternative interpretation of the lines "we are endeavouring to procure"), but the impact with Lake Como would provide Percy and Mary with fresh inspiration nevertheless.

If today, in the Villa Pliniana reopened two years ago under the aegis of the American chain Sereno Hotels, there is a Shelley suite, it is no coincidence. A few months after his letter to Byron, during the summer spent in Lucca, instead of Lake Como, Percy would write *Rosalind and Helen*, in which he would turn his impressions impetuously described in the letter from the previous spring into poetry. In this long poem entirely set on the shores of Lake Como, as the author specifies in an opening couplet, Helen's abode is the Villa Pliniana itself. This is clear from the description, so very like that in the letter to Byron:

And with these words they rose, and towards the flood
Of the blue lake, beneath the leaves now wind
With equal steps and fingers intertwined:
Thence to a lonely dwelling, where the shore
Is shadowed with steep rocks, and cypresses
Cleave with their dark green cones the silent skies,
And with their shadows the clear depths below,
And where a little terrace from its bowers,
Of blooming myrtle and faint lemon-flowers,
Scatters its sense-dissolving fragrance o'er
The liquid marble of the windless lake.

For her part, Mary would recall the Villa Pliniana in her apocalyptic 1826 novel *The Last Man*, in which the main characters (Lionel Verney, based character-wise on Mary herself, and Adrian, Count of Windsor, inspired by her husband), fleeing the plague that is killing off their kind, manage to secure a summer home, the very Villa Pliniana on Lake Como, together with their children Clara and Evelyn (alias the aforementioned Allegra and the young third-born son of the Shelleys, William, who would die in early childhood, like their two previous children).

In another of Mary's books, *Rambles in Germany and Italy* (1844), an epistolary-style account of her travels in 1840, 1842 and 1842, Mary - widowed roughly twenty years earlier and having lost almost all those she loved, oddly, a fate the "creature" had inflicted on "doctor Frankenstein": Percy would drown off the Italian shore at Lerici in 1822 and was laid to rest in Rome's Protestant cemetery, with his son William) - would reiterate her "desire to go back to the Villa Pliniana, which lingered in my memory as a place filled with a magical beauty."

Getting back to *Frankenstein* and the Shelley's first Italian journey, two hundred years later both the novel and the journey continue to resonate with our contemporaries. Further proof of this takes the form of the film inspired by the "haunted summer" and Mary's masterpiece, two of which featured locations on Lake Como. The doyen of Italian film critics, Morando Morandini, said as much in 2013 in his introduction to the second volume of the film guide *Le stelle del lago di Como*, which I myself edited, Morandini wrote, "The two films are Hollywood productions [...]: *The Haunted Summer* (1988) by Ivan Passer

and *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990), which marks Roger Corman's return to directing after two decades." Both directors found the Lake Como scenery to be most similar to that of Lake Geneva in the 1800s, and so it was - although they may not been aware of the fact - that they wound up making Percy and Mary's dream of staying on Lake Como with their friend Byron come true, at least fictionally. In both cases, however, the sets for the films were Villa Melzi d'Eril in Bellagio and not the Villa Pliniana, which has waited decades for a filmmaker with the courage to taken on its dark beauty. Since 1942, if the truth be told: the year Mario Soldati used the Villa Pliniana for the castle in *Malombra*.