

Cornelius Agrippa.⁸ I opened it with apathy; the theory which he attempts to demonstrate, and the wonderful facts which he relates, soon changed this feeling into enthusiasm. A new light seemed to dawn upon my mind; and, bounding with joy, I communicated my discovery to my father. I cannot help remarking here the many opportunities instructors possess of directing the attention of their pupils to useful knowledge, which they utterly neglect. My father looked carelessly at the title-page of my book, and said, "Ah! Cornelius Agrippa! My dear Victor, do not waste your time upon this; it is sad trash."

If, instead of this remark, my father had taken the pains to explain to me, that the principles of Agrippa had been entirely exploded, and that a modern system of science had been introduced, which possessed much greater powers than the ancient, because the powers of the latter were chimerical, while those of the former were real and practical; under such circumstances, I should certainly have thrown Agrippa aside, and, with my imagination warmed as it was, should probably have applied myself to the more rational theory of chemistry which has resulted from modern discoveries. It is even possible, that the train of my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin. But the cursory glance my father had taken of my volume by no means assured me that he was acquainted with its contents; and I continued to read with the greatest avidity.

When I returned home, my first care was to procure the whole works of this author, and afterwards of Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus.⁹ I read and studied the wild fancies of these writers with delight; they appeared to me treasures known to few beside myself;¹⁰ and although I often wished to communicate these secret stores of knowledge to my father, yet his indefinite censure of my favourite Agrippa always withheld me. I disclosed my discoveries to Elizabeth,

⁸Controversial, persecuted German occultist and skeptic (1486–1535), author of *De Occulta Philosophia* (of Occult Science), 1513.

⁹Paracelsus (?1493–1541), Swiss mystic and physician, whose interests ranged from magic and alchemy to modern medicine and chemistry, believed that it was possible to create human life by scientific process. Albertus Magnus (c. 1193–1280), German monk, theologian, and scholastic philosopher. P. Shelley told Godwin of his boyhood rapture with "the reveries of Albertus Magnus & Paracelsus" (letter; 3 June 1812). Books were very expensive. It is remarkable for a young teenager to have this purchasing power.

¹⁰For the 1831 version of the rest of this paragraph, and the next four, see pp. 199–200. Shelley expands Victor's secret romance with occult science.

therefore, under a promise of strict secrecy; but she did not interest herself in the subject, and I was left by her to pursue my studies alone.

It may appear very strange, that a disciple of Albertus Magnus should arise in the eighteenth century; but our family was not scientific, and I had not attended any of the lectures given at the schools of Geneva. My dreams were therefore undisturbed by reality; and I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life.¹¹ But the latter obtained my most undivided attention: wealth was an inferior object; but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!

Nor were these my only visions. The raising of ghosts or devils was a promise liberally accorded by my favourite authors,¹² the fulfilment of which I most eagerly sought; and if my incantations were always unsuccessful, I attributed the failure rather to my own inexperience and mistake, than to a want of skill or fidelity in my instructors.

The natural phenomena that take place every day before our eyes did not escape my examinations. Distillation, and the wonderful effects of steam, processes of which my favourite authors were utterly ignorant, excited my astonishment; but my utmost wonder was engaged by some experiments on an air-pump, which I saw employed by a gentleman whom we were in the habit of visiting.¹³

The ignorance of the early philosophers on these and several other points served to decrease their credit with me: but I could not entirely throw them aside, before some other system should occupy their place in my mind.

When I was about fifteen years old, we had retired to our house near Belrive,¹⁴ when we witnessed a most violent and terrible thunder-storm. It advanced from behind the mountains of Jura; and the thunder burst at once with frightful loudness from various quarters of the heavens.¹⁵ I remained, while the storm lasted, watching its progress with curiosity and delight. As I stood at the door, on a sudden

¹¹Medieval alchemists sought the elixir of life, to restore youth; the philosopher's stone would change base metals to gold. The hero of Godwin's novel *St. Leon* (1799) uncovers both secrets.

¹²Percy Shelley conducted such experiments.

¹³Erasmus Darwin speculated about steam-power.

¹⁴"Beautiful shore" (French), about 4 miles from Geneva.

¹⁵For Byron's famous rendering of such events, see pp. 267–69.

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.¹⁶ When we visited it the next morning, we found the tree shattered in a singular manner. 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;¹⁷ and I eagerly inquired of my father the nature and origin of thunder and lightning. He replied, "Electricity," describing at the same time the various effects of that power. He 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.¹⁸

This last stroke completed the overthrow of Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus, who had so long reigned the lords of my imagination. But by some fatality I did not feel inclined to commence the study of any modern system; and this disinclination was influenced by the following circumstance.

My father expressed a wish that I should attend a course of lectures upon natural philosophy,¹⁹ to which I cheerfully consented. Some accident prevented my attending these lectures until the course was nearly finished. The lecture, being therefore one of the last, was entirely incomprehensible to me. The professor discoursed with the greatest fluency of potassium and boron, of sulphates and oxyds, terms to which I could affix no idea; and I became disgusted with the science of natural philosophy, although I still read Pliny and Buffon with delight, authors, in my estimation, of nearly equal interest and utility.²⁰

My occupations at this age were principally the mathematics, and most of the branches of study appertaining to that science. I was busily employed in learning languages; Latin was already familiar to

¹⁶An omen of Victor's fate after his experiment with electricity. See pp. 65, 125, 149, 174.

¹⁷For the 1831 revision of this passage, elaborating Victor's fatal rapture with modern science, see p. 200.

¹⁸An allusion to the famous experiments that earned Benjamin Franklin the nickname "The Modern Prometheus"; Erasmus Darwin was also interested in electricity, a new science that excited many, including Alessandro Volta, who experimented with electric currents in 1800, and Humphry Davy, who was working on electroplating in 1807.

¹⁹The 18th-c. term for natural sciences.

²⁰Pliny (1st c.) and Comte de Buffon (18th c.) were naturalists and rationalists who influenced Percy; Mary read both in 1817.

me, and I began to read some of the easiest Greek authors without the help of a lexicon. I also perfectly understood English and German. This is the list of my accomplishments at the age of seventeen; and you may conceive that my hours were fully employed in acquiring and maintaining a knowledge of this various literature.

Another task also devolved upon me, when I became the instructor of my brothers. Ernest was six years younger than myself, and was my principal pupil. He had been afflicted with ill health from his infancy, through which Elizabeth and I had been his constant nurses: his disposition was gentle, but he was incapable of any severe application. William, the youngest of our family, was yet an infant, and the most beautiful little fellow in the world;²¹ his lively blue eyes, dimpled cheeks, and endearing manners, inspired the tenderest affection.

Such was our domestic circle, from which care and pain seemed for ever banished. My father directed our studies, and my mother partook of our enjoyments. Neither of us possessed the slightest pre-eminence over the other; the voice of command was never heard amongst us; but mutual affection engaged us all to comply with and obey the slightest desire of each other.

Chapter II

When I had attained the age of seventeen, my parents resolved that I should become a student at the university of Ingolstadt.¹ I had hitherto attended the schools of Geneva; but my father thought it necessary, for the completion of my education, that I should be made acquainted with other customs than those of my native country. My departure was therefore fixed at an early date; but, before the day resolved upon could arrive, the first misfortune of my life occurred—an omen, as it were, of my future misery.

Elizabeth had caught the scarlet fever; but her illness was not severe, and she quickly recovered. During her confinement, many arguments had been urged to persuade my mother to refrain from attending upon

²¹The Shelleys' son William, named for William Godwin, was born January 1816; his mother conceived *Frankenstein* in June.

¹The University of Ingolstadt, in Bavaria, Germany, housed a medical school, and was a well-known center of progressive learning. One of its professors founded a secret society there, the Order of the Illuminati. Its advocacy of free-thinking and radical politics got it outlawed in 1785.

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