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Frankenstein, Matilda, and the legacies of Godwin and Wollstonecraft

[My mother's] greatness of soul & my father high talents have perpetually reminded me that I ought to degenerate as little as I could from those from whom I derived my being . . . my chief merit must always be derived, first from the glory these wonderful beings have shed [*?around*] me, & then for the enthusiasm I have for excellence & the ardent admiration I feel for those who sacrifice themselves for the public good. (L 114)

In this letter of September 1827 to Frances Wright, the Scottish-born author and social reformer, Mary Shelley reveals just how much she felt her life and thought to be shaped by the social and political ideals of her parents, William Godwin, the leading radical philosopher of the 1790s, and his wife, the proto-feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft. The multiple literary, political, and philosophical influences of Godwin and Wollstonecraft may be traced in all six of Mary Shelley's full-length novels, as well as in her tales, biographies, essays, and other shorter writings. Yet while she consistently wrote within the framework established by her parents' concerns, she was no mere imitator of their works. Writing with an awareness of how French revolutionary politics had unfolded through the Napoleonic era, Mary Shelley extends and reformulates the many-sided legacies of Godwin and Wollstonecraft in extreme, imaginatively arresting ways. Those legacies received their most searching reappraisal in *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), Mary Shelley's remarkable first novel, and were re-examined a year later in *Matilda*, a novella telling the story of incestuous love between father and daughter, which, though it remained unpublished until 1959, has now become one of her best-known works.

Though *Frankenstein* appeared anonymously, Mary Shelley advertised her primary intellectual allegiance in the dedication of the first edition, "To William Godwin, Author of Political Justice, Caleb Williams, &c." Reviewers, piqued by the absence of the author's name, were quick to draw parallels

with Godwin's writings, but could not agree on the nature of those parallels. Sir Walter Scott, in a long, insightful piece in *Blackwood's Magazine*, declared that *Frankenstein* was a novel on the same plan as Godwin's *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799), in which "the author's principal object . . . is less to produce an effect by means of the marvels of the narrations, than to open new trains and channels of thought."¹ He surmised that the author was Percy Bysshe Shelley, Godwin's son-in-law. The liberal *Scots* (later, *Edinburgh*) *Magazine*, owned by Archibald Constable, Godwin's friend and publisher, was torn between admiration and censure: "Here is one of the productions of the modern school in its highest style of caricature and exaggeration. It is formed on the Godwinian manner, and has all the faults, but likewise many of the beauties of that model." Again invoking *St. Leon*, the reviewer confessed himself fascinated as well as repelled by "this wild fiction" and attributed its "monstrous conceptions" to "the wild and irregular theories of the age."² In contrast, J. W. Croker, writing in the Tory *Quarterly Review*, compared *Frankenstein* to Godwin's latest novel, *Mandeville: A Tale of the Seventeenth Century* (1817), a confessional account of spiraling religious obsession:

[*Frankenstein*] is piously dedicated to Mr. Godwin, and is written in the spirit of his school . . . Mr. Godwin is the patriarch of a literary family, whose chief skill is in delineating the wanderings of the intellect . . . His disciples are a kind of *out-pensioners of Bedlam*, and, like "Mad Bess" or "Mad Tom," are occasionally visited with paroxysms of genius and fits of expression, which make sober-minded people wonder and shudder.³

While these early reviewers identified Mary Shelley's major intellectual affiliation, they did not grasp its full significance. What did it mean to be brought up and educated in the Godwin "school"? From her birth on August 30, 1797, Mary Shelley was indissolubly linked to her parents' controversial writings and reputations. Wollstonecraft, who had married Godwin earlier that year, died on September 10, 1797 from complications following the birth. The story of her life was disclosed to all when Godwin published *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in January 1798.⁴ This was a work of unprecedented biographical frankness, which covered every phase of Wollstonecraft's unorthodox career. It documented her friendship with the married artist Henry Fuseli, her residence in revolutionary France, her liaison with the American merchant Gilbert Imlay (to whom she bore a child, Fanny), her two attempts at suicide, her domestic "experiment" with Godwin, and, finally, her slow, painful death.⁵ From Godwin's point of view, such candor was an attempt to enact in the public sphere the revolutionary doctrine of sincerity he had advocated in his works

of the early 1790s: frank information about Wollstonecraft's unconventional domestic circumstances was necessary to make her individual history an effective agent of historical change. Contemporary readers, however, were shocked rather than liberated by what they perceived as cold-hearted revelations of Wollstonecraft's immorality, and *Memoirs* provoked widespread hostility from the conservative press.

Even before the publication of *Memoirs*, Godwin was regarded as a dangerously subversive "disturber of the status quo."⁶ *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, his great work of philosophical anarchism, appeared in February 1793. Here Godwin argued that individuals, by the exercise of reason and judgment, have the power to emancipate themselves from the false opinion on which government is based, leading to the gradual dissolution of all legislative restraints.⁷ This substantial philosophical treatise became an immediate success among revolutionary sympathizers of all persuasions. Despite Godwin's principled opposition to the use of force, his vigorous criticism of all forms of political authority seemed to offer leaders of the democratic reform movement a philosophical justification for their practical demands, and this may have prompted the government to debate his prosecution.⁸ The view that Godwin's theories posed a threat to social stability was reinforced by his next two works: *Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), a novel dramatizing the impact of aristocratic corruption on the individual; and *Cursory Strictures* (1794), a pamphlet written in defense of twelve leading radicals charged with high treason in October 1794. Indeed, by late 1797, Godwin's teachings were felt to be so dangerous that the *Anti-Jacobin*, a satirical journal supported by government funds, launched a popular campaign to discredit him.⁹ That campaign found a new focus after the publication of *Memoirs*, in which Godwin not only politicized Wollstonecraft's arguments in favor of women's rights to equality and self-determination, but also conceptualized her as an agent of revolutionary social change. The ensuing reaction against the advanced social theories of Godwin and Wollstonecraft lasted well into the nineteenth century.

Whatever the legacy of fame or notoriety surrounding her parents, Mary Shelley was brought up to share their central belief in the duty of engagement in public debate on all pertinent moral, social, and political issues as a means of contributing to the general welfare. Apart from attending a local day school at the age of four and a boarding school at Ramsgate at the age of thirteen, Mary Shelley was educated at home.¹⁰ The household in which she grew up comprised five children with no two parents in common: in addition to herself and Fanny Imlay, it included Jane Clairmont (later known as Claire) and her half-brother Charles, the two children of

Godwin's second wife, Mary Jane Clairmont; William Godwin, Jr. was born in 1803, fifteen months after his parents' marriage. Apparently domestic complications did not inhibit the family's vibrant intellectual life. From his background in eighteenth-century Protestant Dissent, Godwin derived a lasting belief in education as the key to social change, and sought to put his enlightened pedagogical theories into practice in raising his children. Mary Shelley's early reading included her father's works of reformist history, classical literature, and English grammar, written for the children's bookshop established by the Godwins in 1805.¹¹ In these works, he developed a mode of writing designed to encourage children to think for themselves, and sought to cultivate the reader's imagination as a means of fostering moral autonomy. In addition, Mary Shelley read extensively in Godwin's library, which included his own books and her mother's, along with a wealth of literature, history, science, and philosophy in both French and English Enlightenment traditions. Godwin also took the children on regular outings to public lectures, plays, and art galleries, and encouraged them to meet the many distinguished writers, artists, scientists, and medical men – such as Anthony Carlisle, Coleridge, Humphry Davy, Fuseli, Hazlitt, Charles and Mary Lamb, and Wordsworth – who visited him at home. The Godwin household thus provided Mary Shelley with an unusually wide-ranging education, in which different forms of knowledge, scientific as well as literary, were equally available as intellectual and literary resources.

When in July 1814 Mary Shelley, then aged sixteen, eloped to the Continent with another of her father's visitors, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and accompanied by Claire Clairmont, her Godwinian education continued to flourish. As she recalled in October 1838: "To be something great and good was the precept given me by my father: Shelley reiterated it" (*J* II 554). Percy Bysshe Shelley's successive readings of *Political Justice* laid the foundations for his own political philosophy. Three areas of Godwin's early teachings became central aspects of the younger man's thought: Godwin's insistence on the connection between politics and morality; his belief in the individual's potential for rational improvement; and his attacks on monarchy, aristocracy, and all the forms of internalized values for which Percy Bysshe Shelley adopted the term "Custom."¹² Percy Bysshe Shelley also sought to fashion his life in terms of Godwin's early theories. When in January 1812 he wrote to introduce himself to Godwin as his intellectual heir, he conceptualized his upbringing in terms of his mentor's analysis of the corrupting effects of aristocracy, to which, he declared, "your inestimable book on 'Political Justice'" provided an antidote.¹³ Moreover, Percy Bysshe Shelley's elopement with Mary Shelley, despite his marriage to Harriet Westbrook, was planned in the light of Godwin's early arguments against marriage as "the most odious

of all monopolies”¹⁴ – though in practice it led to a two-year estrangement from Godwin. Over the next few years, up to and including the writing of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley and her lover embarked on a shared, intensive course of reading, which included all of Godwin’s and Wollstonecraft’s works, documenting their progress in a collaborative journal designed to emulate the intellectual reciprocity of Mary Shelley’s parents.

While Mary Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley turned to her parents’ works partly in order to legitimate their own experiment in revolutionary domesticity, they also sought to emulate her parents’ roles as social and cultural critics. Just as Godwin and Wollstonecraft felt the events of the French Revolution on their pulses, so too the Shelleys bore witness to the impact of the “great and extraordinary events” (*History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*, NSW VIII 21) of Napoleon’s meteoric career, culminating in his defeat and the restoration of despotical governments in Europe. In August 1814, they traveled through French countryside ravaged just months earlier by Cossack troops, the final result of Napoleon’s unsuccessful Russian campaign. In June 1816, their second continental tour took them to Geneva, the birthplace of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which prompted Mary Shelley to reflect on the whole course of “that revolution, which his writings mainly contributed to mature, and which, notwithstanding the temporary bloodshed and injustice with which it was polluted, has produced enduring benefits to mankind, which all the chicanery of statesmen, nor even the great conspiracy of kings, can entirely render vain” (*History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*, NSW VIII 46). Later that year, the Shelleys’ attention shifted to the disturbing events at home, notably the savage government response to the last phase of Luddite uprisings (1811–16), in which workers in the manufacturing industries united to destroy the machines which threatened their livelihood, and to the Spa Fields riot of December 1816.¹⁵

In their reading, the Shelleys sought an intelligible explanation of how the progressive ideals of the French Revolution had collapsed in despotism, both at home and abroad.¹⁶ Alongside Godwin’s philosophical theory of revolution in *Political Justice* and Wollstonecraft’s eye-witness account, *An Historical and Moral View of . . . the French Revolution* (1794), they studied counter-revolutionary theories of intellectual conspiracy, such as the Abbé Barruel’s *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (1797–98). They gave special attention to autobiographical and biographical writings, which highlighted the inseparability of personal and historical experience. As well as reading Godwin’s philosophical biographies, *Life of Chaucer* (1803) and *Lives of Edward and John Philips, Nephews and Pupils of Milton* (1815), they studied biographical sketches of revolutionary leaders, such as the loyalist John Adolphus’s *Biographical Memoirs of the French Revolution* (1799),

and the self-justifying memoirs of persecuted Girondins (the moderate faction in the French Legislative Assembly), such as Jean-Baptiste Louvet de Couvray's *Narrative of the Dangers to which I have been Exposed . . .* (1795). After reading Wollstonecraft's autobiographical work of revolutionary instruction, *Letters Written . . . in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), they turned to the two works that had provided a model for her politicized language of sensibility, Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782–89) and *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782). Finally, and most important, the pair read widely in Godwin's novels, which employed a Rousseauvian confessional form to explore the contradictory relations between the self and society. In addition to Wollstonecraft's unfinished Godwinian tale, *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1798), they read and reread Godwin's four mature novels, *Caleb Williams*, *St. Leon*, *Fleetwood; or, The New Man of Feeling* (1805), and *Mandeville*, in which he continuously modified and reformulated his political principles in response to the historical and cultural changes of the post-revolutionary era.¹⁷

Frankenstein's central, flawed aspiration to create "a new species," which "would bless [him] as its creator and source" (*F* 1 iii 32), has often been read as a specific critique of Godwin's utopian idealism, as set out in the first edition of *Political Justice*.¹⁸ Such readings take their cue from Godwin's tentative speculations concerning a future state of rational beings, which are based on Benjamin Franklin's "sublime conjecture . . . that 'mind will one day become omnipotent over matter'" (*PJ* 460). Godwin writes:

The men . . . will cease to propagate, for they will no longer have any motive, either of error or duty, to induce them. In addition to this they will perhaps be immortal. The whole will be a people of men, and not of children . . . There will be no war, no crime, no administration of justice as it is called, and no government. (*PJ* 465)

Such projections concerning the regeneration of the individual and of society were by no means unique to Godwin, but were also present in the writings and speeches of French revolutionary ideologues. For example, Saint-Just and Robespierre each described the making of himself into a new man, devoted to the Rousseauvian principle of "public virtue"; each announced plans for the creation of a "new race" of socially autonomous citizens, educated by the state, whose attachment to family life would be broken.¹⁹ Additionally, by the time that Mary Shelley began writing *Frankenstein* in 1816, Godwin had reformulated his early account of moral action to incorporate the private affections, and had dramatized the socially and psychologically destructive effects of revolutionary aspirations in *St. Leon*.²⁰ *Frankenstein*, as a critical

reassessment of the politics of the French revolutionary era which provides "a retrospect on the whole process . . . through Waterloo,"²¹ has more in common with Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's fictions of historical and cultural reappraisal than has been allowed.

As in the best-known Godwinian novels of the 1790s, *Caleb Williams* and *Maria*, *Frankenstein* achieves a balance between psychological and social concerns, and between personal and political allegory.²² The central, highly charged relationship between creator and creature reenacts the complex bond of fear and fascination between the aristocrat Falkland and his servant Caleb. In the earlier novel, Caleb is cast as a "monster" for daring to challenge Falkland's social authority, but it is Falkland who becomes an inhuman tyrant. Mary Shelley builds on Godwin's use of the pursuit motif to destabilize conventional moral values: in *Frankenstein*, the abandoned creature returns to confront his "monstrous" father, and the pair act out a drama of enticement and threat that leads to widespread social destruction. In her choice of a multiple narrative mode, Mary Shelley was also influenced by *Maria*, in which Wollstonecraft presents several first-person narratives telling the same, mutually reinforcing story of the social oppression of women in different classes of society. Mary Shelley similarly presents several versions of the same tale, but this time the stories are told from competing angles, highlighting her dissolution of moral and cultural certainties.

Yet Mary Shelley's skeptical treatment of revolutionary idealism is partly anticipated by Godwin's cosmopolitan historical novel, *St. Leon*, in which he paid tribute to Wollstonecraft's influence on his thought. In *St. Leon* as in *Frankenstein*, overweening public ambitions, symbolized by secret occult practices, lead to the breakdown of family life. The conversations between the French aristocrat St. Leon and his endlessly sympathetic wife Marguerite (an idealized portrait of Wollstonecraft) reflect the opposition of public and private values found in *Letters from Norway*, in which Wollstonecraft explores the destructive impact of "the chase after wealth" on domestic relationships.²³ The plot of *St. Leon* is structured as a series of bondings and separations. Each experience of shared domestic tranquillity is disrupted by St. Leon's obsessive striving for wealth, honor, and fame, which leads only to an unbearable social isolation: "I possessed the gift of immortal life," recalls St. Leon, "but I looked on myself as a monster that did not deserve to exist."²⁴ Yet St. Leon, like all of Godwin's protagonists, is an unreliable interpreter of his own history, and the novel's final message is equivocal: while St. Leon warns against the neglect of domestic ties in pursuit of the ideal, he is still fascinated by the prospect of wealth and social power. Similarly, *Frankenstein* is ultimately unwilling to abandon his misguided revolutionary ambitions, despite their human cost.

The subtitle of *Frankenstein*, “The Modern Prometheus,” further suggests that Mary Shelley’s study of revolutionary aspirations is specifically concerned with the question of Rousseau’s influence. Rousseau, with his dual reputation as one of the intellectual fathers of French republicanism and as, in Wollstonecraft’s phrase, “the true Prometheus of sentiment,” was a central, ambivalent presence in her parents’ post-revolutionary writings.²⁵ This ambivalence is especially evident in *Fleetwood*, where Godwin contrasts the philanthropist Macneil, who presides over a patriarchal idyll modeled on Rousseau’s novel, *The New Eloise* (1761), with the misanthropic “new man of feeling” of his subtitle, Fleetwood, who resembles Rousseau’s autobiographical persona in the *Confessions*. Macneil, a former friend of Rousseau, volunteers an analysis of his character, in which he admits that Rousseau, toward the end of his life, was deluded and “lived . . . in a world of his own.” Yet, Macneil declares, “he had such resources in his own mind . . . his vein of enthusiasm was so sublime . . . It was difficult for me to persuade myself that the person I saw at such times, was the same as at others was beset with such horrible visions.”²⁶ This ambivalent attitude to Rousseau was shared not only by Mary Shelley but also by other writers of her generation.²⁷ Byron, for example, provided a highly equivocal portrait of Rousseau in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (hereafter *CHP*), Canto the Third, transcribed in part by Mary Shelley at the Villa Diodati in 1816. Like Napoleon, another revolutionary overreacher undone by a Promethean “fire / And motion of the soul” (*CHP* III, lines 371–72), Rousseau is both praised for his passionate sensibility and blamed for his inability to control the forces it unleashed: “as a tree / On fire by lightning; with ethereal flame / Kindled he was, and blasted” (*CHP* III, lines 734–36). Such images of simultaneous creativity and destruction underscore Mary Shelley’s rewriting of the Prometheus legend as a critique of Rousseauvian “enthusiasm,” in which the use of competing first-person narratives assigns the task of evaluation to the reader in Godwin’s manner.

To begin with, Mary Shelley’s use of symbolic European locations highlights the associations between Frankenstein and the autobiographical Rousseau. The novel’s action centers on the republic of Geneva, where Rousseau was born and where the Frankenstein family is established as a pillar of bourgeois society, celebrated for its devotion to public affairs, in the era of the French Revolution.²⁸ However, it is at the University of Ingolstadt, famed as the birthplace of the Illuminati,²⁹ a secret society pledged to spread egalitarian principles and infidelity (or atheism), that Frankenstein begins his revolutionary education. Here Frankenstein’s affinity with Rousseau is underlined by his “primitivist” reluctance to abandon the ancient alchemical dream of “immortality and power” (*F* I ii 27) in favor of “progressive”

science.³⁰ It is only after hearing M. Waldman echo this ancient ideal, in his lecture on the “new and almost unlimited powers” (*F* I ii 28) of modern chemists to control and shape nature, that Frankenstein is persuaded of the validity of modern scientific endeavors. Under M. Waldman’s tutelage, he is inspired with “an almost supernatural enthusiasm” (*F* I iii 30) for scientific enquiry, culminating in his project of solitary creation.

Moreover, Frankenstein’s rejection of his creature makes him guilty of a crime that made Rousseau notorious: parental abandonment. Just as Rousseau in the *Confessions* and *Reveries* repeatedly defended leaving his five children by Thérèse Levasseur at a Paris orphanage,³¹ so too Frankenstein seeks to justify his negligence by depicting the creature as a malignant “devil,” “monster,” and “fiend” (*F* II ii 67). Instead of acknowledging the creature’s independent rights and needs, Frankenstein depicts him as a projection of his own worst qualities, adapting images of monstrosity drawn from anti-Jacobin propaganda: “I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind . . . nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me” (*F* I vi 49). Frankenstein’s final retreat into an imaginary world of dead friends – “How did I cling to their dear forms . . . and persuade myself that they still lived!” (*F* III vii 142) – further recalls the moral solipsism of Rousseau, who, dissatisfied with social reality, took refuge in “an ideal world . . . peopled with beings after my own heart.”³² Such parallels with Rousseau’s life story establish Frankenstein as another disappointed egotist in the manner of St. Leon and Fleetwood, whose self-justifying confessional narrative collapses into unwitting self-condemnation.

Mary Shelley’s most powerful critique of Frankenstein occurs when she allows the creature to tell his own story. In contrast to Frankenstein’s melodramatic outbursts, the creature’s measured eloquence reflects a Rousseauvian sensibility, tempered by Godwinian logic. Like Caleb Williams in his final courtroom meeting with Falkland, the creature seeks an alternative to “human laws, bloody as they may be” by appealing directly to Frankenstein’s sympathies: “Let your compassion be moved, and do not disdain me. Listen to my tale: when you have heard that, abandon or commiserate me, as you shall judge that I deserve. But hear me” (*F* II ii 66–67). Yet the creature is repeatedly frustrated in his efforts to find an unprejudiced listener within the novel. Though the blind De Lacey’s response to the creature’s story is the opposite to that of Frankenstein – “there is something in your words,” he says, “which persuades me that you are sincere” (*F* II vii 91) – the younger De Laceys are unable to acknowledge a being so different from themselves. The role of the true arbiter of political justice is reserved for the reader of the novel.

The creature's life history is both the tale of a beleaguered individual surviving against the odds and an allegorical account of the progress of the human race. It is broadly structured as a narrative of natural goodness corrupted by civil society in the manner of Rousseau's *Discourse . . . on Inequality among Men* (1755). Yet the creature speedily outgrows Rousseau's notion of happiness that arises from the satisfaction of physical passions, and his developing moral and intellectual awareness reflects Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's shared emphasis on the formative power of education and circumstances. Moreover, unlike the essentially solitary man in Rousseau's state of nature, Frankenstein's creature instinctively seeks society. Thus he learns to read by listening to the cross-cultural exchanges between Felix De Lacey and Safie, themselves fugitives from injustice in revolutionary Paris. As he secretly shares in the De Laceys' patriarchal idyll, his lack of biological origins is offset by a comprehensive cultural education. His program of vicarious instruction begins with Volney's *The Ruins; or, A Survey of the Revolutions of Empires* (1791–92), a powerful Enlightenment critique of ancient and modern governments as tyrannical and supported by religious fraud. This work gives him insight into the mixed nature of humankind and into systematized social inequality: "Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? . . . I heard of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty; of rank, descent, and noble blood" (F II v 80). The books that he finds by chance, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), complement Volney's historical overview by focusing on issues of individual morality at different stages of Western civilization.

Such progressive reading-matter not only transforms the creature's sense of himself, but also equips him to launch a vigorous critique of Frankenstein's actions in both public and private spheres. While the creature's Godwinian reading of *Paradise Lost* as "a true history . . . of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures" leads him to curse Frankenstein as a tyrannical God, he also reproaches his creator for denying him full humanity: "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous" (F II vii 87, ii 66).³³ When Frankenstein reneges on his promise to create a female companion, his offspring's campaign of vengeful murders acts out Frankenstein's own withholding of love and drives home the arbitrary nature of the justice meted out to himself. As Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in a review of *Frankenstein*, intended for the *Examiner*: "Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked . . . divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations – malevolence and selfishness."³⁴ Yet the creature's history is more ambiguous than this reading allows. In his final, grief-stricken speech over his creator's corpse, he exclaims, "Oh

Frankenstein! generous and self-devoted being!" (*F* III vii 153), and blames himself for the failure of his creator's revolutionary experiment.

This ambiguity toward Frankenstein and his project is reinforced by the attitude of Robert Walton, whose narrative of a failed voyage of discovery, addressed to his sister Margaret Saville, frames that of Frankenstein and of his creature. At first glance, Walton's life history provides a corrective to Frankenstein's tale of overreaching ambition. Though Walton, like Frankenstein, dreams of "the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on mankind to the last generation," his framing narrative seems to relegate Frankenstein's story to a cautionary tale: "Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example" (*F* I, Letter I 8, iii 31). Similarly, Walton's longing for society appears to provide a critical gloss on Frankenstein's story of solitary egotism: whereas Frankenstein laments what he perceives as his irrevocable destiny, Walton recognizes the insufficiency of the individual and laments the absence of a friend.

Yet Walton's narrative is full of contradictions. He longs for a companion, yet he has put himself in the situation where he seems least likely to find one. When he meets Frankenstein, he quickly begins to "love him as a brother," idolizing him as a figure of persecuted benevolence who resembles the autobiographical Rousseau: "I never saw a more interesting creature: his eyes have generally an expression of wildness, and even madness; but there are moments when, if any one performs an act of kindness towards him . . . his whole countenance is lighted up, as it were, with a beam of benevolence and sweetness that I never saw equalled" (*F* I, Letter IV 14). Their final exchange is deeply ambivalent. Though Walton forgoes his hopes of "utility and glory" in compliance with the will of the sailors, who seek to return to society, this decision is presented in negative terms: "Thus are my hopes blasted by cowardice and indecision; I come back ignorant and disappointed" (*F* III vii 150). Frankenstein, though chastened, is even more unwilling to relinquish his ambitions. While he admits that his project was impelled by "a fit of enthusiastic madness," he exonerates himself of blame for his treatment of the creature, and his last words to Walton leave open the possibility of the future success of similar quests for knowledge: "Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed" (*F* III vii 151, 152).

The effect of these mixed messages from all three principal narrators – creator, creature, and explorer – is to present the reader with a moral choice: as in earlier Godwinian novels, do we collude with the flawed protagonist's version of events, or learn from his tale? Mary Shelley's attitude

toward revolutionary “enthusiasm” is anything but straightforward. While she presents a critical study of Frankenstein’s self-centered ambition, dramatizing the disastrous consequences of his neglect of the domestic affections, she also emphasizes the social origins of the creature’s “monstrous” deeds. Such ambivalence is compounded by the use of a Rousseauvian confessional narrative, with its inbuilt drive toward self-justification. Just as Frankenstein ends his story by claiming that his ideal was not unworthy, even if historical circumstances were unpropitious, so too the creature, in his last speech to Walton, asserts his fundamentally benevolent nature, thwarted by an unjust society: “Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings, who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of bringing forth” (*F* III vii 154). Significantly, this notional image of sympathetic community is momentarily enacted through Walton’s willingness to “pardon” the creature’s “outward form” and listen to his tale. But, as in *Caleb Williams*, this ideal social transformation is unaffordable within the constraints of “things as they are,” and the creature’s extravagant plans for self-immolation complete the novel’s breakdown of meaning. Even so, Mary Shelley posits an alternative to Frankenstein’s misguided attempt to force the pace of historical change, outside the novel, by encouraging a gradual transformation in moral consciousness through the experience of reading.

In *Matilda*, Mary Shelley abandons the multiple narrative mode of *Frankenstein* in favor of a confessional account of the motherless heroine’s troubled relations with her father and her would-be lover, Woodville, a Shelleyan poet-figure. The autobiographical format of *Matilda* (Mary Shelley spelled the novel’s title *Matilda* and the heroine’s name, “Mathilda”), together with its emotionally intense language, has traditionally led critics to read the work as an uncontrolled expression of Mary Shelley’s psychological anxieties following the deaths in September 1818 and June 1819 of her two young children.³⁵ Yet to read *Matilda* merely as an expression of psychic crisis is to overlook her self-consciousness as a literary artist. The exploitation of autobiographical material and the use of a self-dramatizing, histrionic narrator are established generic features of the Godwinian novel: *Maria*, *St. Leon*, and *Frankenstein*, for example, all contain extreme, displaced renderings of the author’s personal experience. In *Matilda*, as in earlier works in the Godwin “school,” authorial experience is redeployed in the service of a larger ethical and political design.³⁶

Indeed, the manuscripts of *Matilda* reveal that Mary Shelley deliberately chose the form of an autobiographical memoir after rejecting other narrative modes. The rough draft, entitled *The Fields of Fancy*, shows that Mary Shelley originally conceived of the novella as a cautionary tale of the errors

of unchecked passion. In chapter one, she sets up an intricate narrative frame based on Platonic and Dantean allegories of the soul's journey through suffering to union with the divine.³⁷ An unnamed narrator, mourning the loss of her loved ones, is conducted by Fantasia, a mythical figure, to the Elysian Fields, where the narrator overhears Mathilda, now immortal, telling her tale of earthly sufferings to the prophetess Diotima, the instructor of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*. Diotima responds to Mathilda's story in overtly didactic terms: "It is by the acquirement [*sic*] of wisdom and the loss of the selfishness that is now attached to the sole feeling that possesses you that you will at last mingle in that universal world of which we all now make a divided part" (*NSW* II 407). Yet at the end of her narrative, Mathilda substitutes for Diotima's goal of collective wisdom a wish for individual reunion with her father. This discrepancy between the instructive tenor of the frame and the wish-fulfillment of the inset narrative reveals the unreliability of Mathilda's account and establishes her story as a warning of the dangers of excessive feeling. Mary Shelley's abandonment of the frame narrative indicates her rejection of overtly didactic fiction in favor of the indirect educative purpose of the Godwinian confessional mode.

In *Matilda*, the story is told by the heroine on her deathbed and addressed to Woodville. Like other self-justifying Godwinian protagonists, Mathilda presents herself as the victim of "a hideous necessity," presided over by "malignant fate" (*NSW* II 6, 49). Just as Godwin's use of the flawed narrator invites the reader to play an active interpretative role, so too the ambiguities and contradictions of Mathilda's narrative assign to the reader the task of evaluating her guilt or innocence. Again, Mary Shelley follows Godwinian precedents in structuring *Matilda* as a psychologically intense narrative of temptation and fall. In fact Mathilda's story involves two scenes of temptation, which are placed on either side of the two central chapters dealing, respectively, with her prophetic dream of her father's death and with the pursuit ending in her discovery of his actual death. In the first temptation sequence, Mathilda successfully persuades her father to reveal the secret of his mysterious, brooding behavior, which results in his declaration of his incestuous love for her. In the second, she unsuccessfully tempts Woodville to join her in a suicide pact by drinking laudanum. Yet the coherence of this two-part narrative is not merely a matter of structural symmetry: it also reflects the troubled psychology of the flawed protagonist. Mathilda, cheated by her father's suicide of the deathly union she might have chosen, tries to achieve a similar outcome with Woodville instead.

As in *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley's debt to her parents' writings is not simply a matter of basic similarities of plot and technique: at the heart of the novella is a reappraisal of specific aspects of Godwin's social theories.

In particular, Mary Shelley reevaluates Godwin's early belief in the unrestrained exercise of private judgment, the basis of the theory of gradual social improvement set out in *Political Justice*,³⁸ which formed the core of Percy Bysshe Shelley's political thought.

The first half of *Matilda* is modeled on the central scenes of Godwin's most celebrated narrative of revolutionary change, *Caleb Williams*. Like the inscrutable aristocrat Falkland, whose position is based on hypocrisy and imposture, Mathilda's father maintains a dignified public reserve but suffers secret paroxysms of frenzy. Like Caleb, conjecturing the source of his master's agonies, Mathilda is fascinated by "the diseased yet incomprehensible state of [her father's] mind" (NSW II 20), and determined to seek out the cause. After listening to the account of her father's behavior by his servant, she wonders, "Could there be guilt in it?" (NSW II 24), directly echoing Caleb's conjecture about Falkland's suffering: "Is this . . . the fruit of conscious guilt . . .?"³⁹ Just as Caleb is hurried on by a "fatal impulse," Mathilda declares, "I hardly know what feelings resis[t]lessly impelled me"; while her father's criticism of her "frantic curiosity" resembles Falkland's castigation of Caleb's "foolish inquisitive humour" (CW 110, NSW II 27, CW 123).

Moreover, in the scene when Mathilda confronts her father and demands the truth, Mary Shelley exploits the conventional language of Godwinian gradualism. "[L]et him receive sympathy . . . Let him confide his misery" (NSW II 25), Mathilda says to herself before meeting him, invoking the values extolled in Godwin's notional vision of transformed human relations at the end of *Caleb Williams*. When she first addresses her father, she claims to speak "although with the tender affection of a daughter, yet also with the freedom of a friend and equal" (NSW II 26), gesturing toward that erosion of parent-child distinctions which Godwin saw as an essential preliminary to social change.⁴⁰ "[P]ermit me to gain your confidence," she continues, alluding to "the forbearance that man is entitled to claim from man" which Godwin argued should be exercised toward all men and women as a means of fostering moral autonomy, and which Caleb and Falkland fail to exercise toward each other.⁴¹ When her father continues to resist her entreaties, she exclaims, "You do not treat me with candour," invoking the Dissenting principle which formed the moral underpinning of Godwin's notion of the duty of private judgment.⁴²

Yet Mathilda's plea for unrestricted frankness and sincerity leads to disaster. Like those other flawed, historically premature revolutionaries, Caleb and Frankenstein, Mathilda starts out with benevolent intentions but ends up unleashing forces beyond her control. Her father's revelation of his incestuous feelings, rather than leading to an imagined egalitarian partnership, results in the breakdown of community, and, finally, death. "A mighty

revolution had taken place with regard to me," she says: "the natural work of years had been transacted since the morning" (NSW II 30). In the reversal that follows, both parties flee from the intimacy they formerly sought. Initially Mathilda's father assumes the role of a Godwinian social outcast, but after his death she too takes on this identity. In the second half of the novella, she replicates her father's early mysterious behavior, only this time the story of disabling guilt, like Caleb's, is told from the inside.

In *Matilda*, Mary Shelley also sought to question Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetic assimilation of Godwin's theories. At first glance, Mathilda's rejection of Woodville's consolation seems to repudiate the utopian vision of human potential articulated by Percy Bysshe Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), his grand reworking of the Prometheus myth, begun in 1818. Certainly Woodville, the spokesman for Shelleyan optimism, is ambivalently portrayed. On the one hand he is an ideal poet-figure, compared to Plato and Christ, but at the same time he is morally naive: "He seemed incapable of conceiving of the full extent of the power that selfishness & vice possesses in the world" (NSW II 48). To some extent Woodville appears as a figure of admonishment, since he too, like both Mathilda and her father, has suffered the premature loss of a loved one – his fiancée Elinor – but, unlike Mathilda and her father, he is consoled by his Godwinian faith in gradual but irresistible progress. Yet for all his visionary insight into human ordering schemes, he is unable to respond sufficiently to Mathilda's human need.

The clash between Woodville's idealizing temperament and Mathilda's experience of "dreary reality" (NSW II 56) is most evident when she tries to persuade him to join her in a suicide pact. In an effort to counteract Mathilda's despair, Woodville puts forward an argument based on Godwin's belief in the individual's duty to exercise his or her talents in pursuit of the general good: "If you can bestow happiness on another," he urges Mathilda, "if you can give one other person only one hour of joy ought you not to live to do it?" (NSW II 60).⁴³ Yet his optimistic theories are undercut by the context in which they occur. Though his lessons momentarily comfort Mathilda, they also provoke her most extreme expression of social alienation. Adopting the vocabulary of Frankenstein's creature, she describes herself as "this outcast from human feeling; this monster with whom none might mingle in converse and love . . . a marked creature, a pariah, only fit for death" (NSW II 61).

While this impasse may suggest the limitations of utopian social theories in the face of individual suffering, it also raises the question of whether Mathilda is beyond all help. As well as expressing skepticism concerning the visionary idealism of *Prometheus Unbound*, Mary Shelley challenges Percy Bysshe Shelley's darker vision of "sad reality" (SPP 140) in *The Cenci* (1819). This play, subtitled "A Tragedy," represents the story of Beatrice Cenci, a

beautiful young Italian aristocrat who was raped by her father, then conspired to kill him, and was executed for parricide in 1599. Though Mary Shelley praised the fifth act of this play as “the finest thing he [Percy Bysshe Shelley] ever wrote” (*NSW* II 286),⁴⁴ in *Matilda* she took issue with his representation of Beatrice’s experience. While he, in the Preface to *The Cenci*, describes Beatrice’s story as a moral problem – since she, unlike Prometheus, reacts to her wrongs by doing evil – in the play itself, Beatrice is dramatized as a victim of domestic and social tyranny, who is “violently thwarted from her nature by the necessity of circumstance and opinion” (*SPP* 141).⁴⁵ In Mathilda’s story, however, the role of Godwinian “circumstance and opinion” is by no means clear-cut: instead Mary Shelley focuses on the disabling ambiguities of the heroine’s predicament. Though Mathilda’s experience centers on incestuous feelings rather than on the physical act of incest, it is nevertheless one from which she is unable to recover: “say not to the lily laid prostrate by the storm arise, and bloom as before. My heart was bleeding from its death’s wound; I could live no otherwise” (*NSW* II 45). It is this state of psychological arrest that sets her apart from Woodville, and, she feels, from all humanity, and renders her incapable of responding to new experiences. Each time Woodville leaves her, “despair returned; the work of consolation was ever to begin anew” (*NSW* II 55).

This disquieting perception that suffering may be, in Wordsworth’s phrase, “permanent, obscure, and dark” (*The Borderers* [1797–98], III v 64), confirms Mary Shelley’s fundamental literary affiliation with Godwin, not so much as the author of the 1790s, but as the creator of *Mandeville*, which she later praised as superior to all his works in “forcible developement of human feeling” (*NSW* II 250). In *Mandeville*, Godwin takes as his subject an unstable, self-dramatizing protagonist traumatized by past experiences of loss and betrayal. Pursuing his analysis of the disjunction between the self and society to a new extreme, he allows that the individual could be thwarted as much by psychological impulse – in this case, the repressed passion of sibling incest – as by unfavorable historical circumstances. Mary Shelley’s appropriation of this dark vision in *Matilda* reveals that she continued to extend, modify, and develop her parents’ imaginative concerns beyond *Frankenstein*, and prepares for her further transmutations of their multiform, ambivalent legacies in her subsequent novels.

NOTES

This chapter was written during my tenure, mainly for other purposes, of an Arts and Humanities Board Research Leave Award, held in conjunction with a term’s sabbatical granted by the University of Durham. I am grateful to both institutions for their material support in this and in other areas of my research. My personal

thanks are due to Doucet Devin Fischer, Michael Rossington, and Lisa Vargo, for valuable comments on a draft of this chapter.

- 1 [Sir Walter Scott], "Remarks on *Frankenstein*," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 2 (1818), 614.
- 2 Review of *Frankenstein*, *Edinburgh [Scots] Magazine*, 2nd ser. 2 (March 1818), 249, 252, 253.
- 3 [J. W. Croker], review of *Frankenstein*, *Quarterly Review* 18 (Jan. 1818), 382.
- 4 For details, see Pamela Clemit and Gina Luria Walker, Introduction to William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001), pp. 11–36.
- 5 Godwin, *Memoirs*, p. 106.
- 6 Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. x.
- 7 The best account of Godwin's philosophical arguments is in Mark Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* (London: Duckworth, 1986).
- 8 Mary Shelley, "Life of William Godwin" [1836–40], *Godwin*, ed. Pamela Clemit, *LL* iv 74, 86 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002); but there is no report of such a debate in the official minutes of the Privy Council (Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, p. 105).
- 9 See Peter H. Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 211–33.
- 10 Sources drawn on include Emily W. Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 29–61; and Betty T. Bennett, *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley: An Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 7–16.
- 11 For details, see Pamela Clemit, "Philosophical Anarchism in the Schoolroom: William Godwin's Juvenile Library, 1805–25," *Bibliion: The Bulletin of The New York Public Library*, 9. 1/2 (Fall 2000 / Spring 2001), 44–70.
- 12 The most useful accounts of Percy Bysshe Shelley's debts to Godwin remain Kenneth Neill Cameron, *The Young Shelley: Genesis of a Radical* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), pp. 61–70; and P. M. S. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 76–133.
- 13 Shelley to Godwin, January 3, 1812, *PBSL* 1 227.
- 14 Godwin, *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice* [1793 edn.], *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, gen. ed. Mark Philp, 7 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993), III 453. (Hereafter *PJ*.)
- 15 See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963; rev. edn., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), pp. 627–28, 691–700; cf. Mary Shelley to Leigh Hunt, March 2, 1817, *L* 1 29.
- 16 For the Shelleys' reading lists through 1814–17, see *J* 1 85–103; my account is also indebted to Gerald McNiece, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 10–41.
- 17 For details, see Pamela Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, rpt. 2001), pp. 35–102.
- 18 Eg., Lee Sterrenburg, "Mary Shelley's Monster: Politics and Psyche in *Frankenstein*," *EF* 143–71.

- 19 My account is indebted to Carol Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 133–52, 182–203.
- 20 See Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, pp. 142–53, 202–09; Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel*, pp. 70–79, 88–95.
- 21 Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution, 1789–1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 239.
- 22 The following account of *Frankenstein* expands my arguments in *The Godwinian Novel*, pp. 139–74. Other sources drawn on include David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 178–227; and Gregory Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1–15, 43–75.
- 23 Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 7 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1989), vi 342.
- 24 Godwin, *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century*, *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, gen. ed. Mark Philp, 8 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1992), iv 294.
- 25 Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria*, *Works*, 196; see Gary Kelly, “‘The Romance of Real Life’: Autobiography in Rousseau and William Godwin,” *Man and Nature/L'Homme et La Nature* 1 (1982), 93–101; Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre*, pp. 118–38.
- 26 Godwin, *Fleetwood; or, The New Man of Feeling*, *Collected Novels*, v 159.
- 27 See Edward Duffy, *Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 71–85.
- 28 I am grateful to Patrick Vincent for making available to me his unpublished paper, “‘This Wretched Mockery of Justice’: *Frankenstein* and Geneva,” delivered at *Geneva: An English Enclave*, University of Geneva, November 1–2, 2001.
- 29 Abbé Augustin Barruel, *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, trans. Robert Clifford, 4 vols. (London, 1797–8), iii 444.
- 30 Dart, *Rousseau, Robespierre*, pp. 1–2.
- 31 Eg. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), pp. 333–34; and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 139–40.
- 32 Rousseau, *Confessions*, p. 398.
- 33 For Godwin's view of Milton's Satan, see *PJ* 146; cf. Wollstonecraft's emphasis in *Maria* on Jemima's lack of parental, especially maternal, care (*Works*, 1 108–10).
- 34 Percy Bysshe Shelley, “On ‘Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus’” [1818], *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. E. B. Murray (Oxford University Press, 1993), 1 283.
- 35 Eg., U. C. Knoepfelmacher, “Thoughts on the Aggression of Daughters,” *EF* 113–15; Terence Harpold, “‘Did You Get Mathilda from Papa?': Seduction Fantasy and the Circulation of Mary Shelley's *Mathilda*,” *SiR* 28 (Spring 1989), 49–67; for biographical details, see Sunstein, *Mary Shelley*, pp. 168–79.
- 36 For a fuller statement of the argument developed in the rest of this chapter, see my “From *The Fields of Fancy* to *Matilda*: Mary Shelley's Changing Conception of her Novella,” *Romanticism* 3.2 (1997), 152–69, rpt. in *MST* 64–75.

- 37 Mary Shelley transcribed her husband's translation of Plato's *Symposium* from July 20 to August 6, 1818, and the pair read Dante's *Purgatorio* together in February and August 1819 (*J* 1 220–22, 248, 294–95).
- 38 See Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, pp. 16–23.
- 39 Godwin, *Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams, Collected Novels*, III 101. (Hereafter CW.)
- 40 Cf. *PJ* 18.
- 41 Godwin, *The Enquirer, Political and Philosophical Writings*, v 134; CW 273.
- 42 Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice*, pp. 24, 95.
- 43 Cf. *PJ* 53.
- 44 For Mary Shelley's involvement in the composition of *The Cenci*, see her 1839 "Note on *The Cenci*" (*NSW* II 282–83) and Bennett, *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, pp. 47–48.
- 45 For details, see Michael Rossington, "Shelley, *The Cenci* and the French Revolution," in *Revolution in Writing: British Literary Responses to the French Revolution*, ed. Kelvin Everest (Buckingham and Bristol: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 138–57.