

The Social Contract and the Romantic Canon:
The Individual and Society in the Works of
Wordsworth, Godwin and Mary Shelley

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Abstract

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century social contract philosophy altered the relationship between the individual and society. In this period, society shifted from the previous model of the body politic, to a new concept whereby a diverse group of individuals unite to protect their private rights by forming a social contract. Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau all struggle to develop a model of society which places the individual first. Empiricist critics of this tradition such as Hume and Smith were also influenced by the social contract's revolutionary individualism, but more skeptical of its model of community. The social contract perspective and its problems directly influenced the French Revolution, and – by extension – British Romantic literature. But the social contract has received little attention in a critical tradition dominated by an interest in German idealism, and by a firm belief in Romanticism's avoidance of socio-historical context. This study of the social contract tradition's influence on canonical Romantic-era texts seeks to refocus Romanticism's political self-awareness. My dissertation adds to a recent interest in empiricist contexts, expanding existent discussion to focus on the social contract in several exemplary Romantic-era works.

William Wordsworth's *Prelude* is arguably the archetypal Romantic poem, and also the target of recent new historicist criticism. I trace its dynamic dialogue with Rousseau over its long editorial history. Wordsworth encounters similar difficulties to Rousseau's alienated modern subjects, who experience society as hostile to individual desires. I then examine William Godwin's ambivalent dialogue with social contract philosophy, comparing *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* to *Fleetwood*, which is critical of individualistic social theories. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley critiques the

social contract myth of originary independence, drawing directly on Rousseau and also on Mary Wollstonecraft's references to him. These Romantic texts, written a generation after *The Social Contract* and in the wake of the French Revolution, engage in a new concern with forming a society of isolated individuals. Two hundred years later, this problem remains at the foreground of political theory, partially explaining the contemporary fascination with Romantic icons, such as Wordsworthian nature, the Romantic-Godwinian solitary and Frankenstein's creature.

Résumé

La philosophie du contrat social des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles a modifié la relation entre l'individu et la société. Pendant cette période, la société est passée du précédent modèle du corps politique à un nouveau concept au moyen duquel un groupe d'individus différents s'unissent pour protéger leurs droits en établissant un contrat social. Hobbes, Locke et Rousseau ont lutté pour développer un modèle de société qui met l'individu à la première place. Des critiques empiristes de cette tradition comme Hume et Smith furent aussi influencés par l'individualisme révolutionnaire du contrat social, tout en étant plus sceptiques quant à son modèle de communauté. La perspective du contrat social a eu une influence directe sur la Révolution française, et – par extension – sur la littérature romantique anglaise.

Mais le contrat social n'a pas retenu l'attention d'une tradition critique dominée par son intérêt pour l'idéalisme germanique, et par une ferme croyance dans le fait que le romantisme annulait tout contexte socio-historique. Cette étude de l'influence de la tradition du contrat social sur des textes canoniques du romantisme vise à recentrer la conscience politique du romantisme. Mon travail de recherche s'ajoute à un récent intérêt pour les contextes empiriques, il élargit les débats tout en les concentrant sur le contrat social dans plusieurs ouvrages exemplaires du romantisme.

Le Prélude, de William Wordsworth, sans doute l'archétype du poème romantique, est aussi la cible de la récente nouvelle critique historiciste. Je retrace son dialogue dynamique avec les théories de Rousseau sur sa longue histoire éditoriale. Wordsworth rencontre des difficultés similaires à celle des sujets modernes aliénés de

Rousseau, qui ressentent la société comme hostile aux désirs individuels. J'examine ensuite le dialogue ambivalent de William Godwin avec la philosophie du contrat social, comparant *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* à *Fleetwood*, qui met en question les théories sociales individualistes. Dans *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley critique le mythe de l'indépendance originelle dans le contrat social, s'inspirant directement de Rousseau ainsi que des références qu'y fait Mary Wollstonecraft. Ces textes romantiques, écrits une génération après *Du contrat social* et à la suite de la Révolution française, s'intéressent à la formation d'une société composée d'individus isolés. Deux cents ans plus tard, ce problème reste au premier plan de la théorie politique, expliquant en partie la fascination contemporaine pour les icônes romantiques, comme la nature de Wordsworth, le solitaire du romantique Godwin et la créature de Frankenstein.

Introduction

Man as an Island: The Social Contract and Romantic Criticism

"I ... was reduced to a meer state of nature[.]" (Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* 94)

In *Émile*, Rousseau prescribes a strict literary diet for his young student, which initially consists of a single book. He explains, "[t]his is the first book Émile will read; for a long time it will form his whole library What is this wonderful book? Is it Aristotle? Pliny? Buffon? No; it is *Robinson Crusoe*" (*Émile* 176). Rousseau introduces Émile to *Robinson Crusoe* in order "[to] make a reality of the desert island which formerly served as an illustration. The condition, I confess, is not that of a social being, nor is it in all probability Émile's own condition, but he should use it as a standard of comparison for all other conditions" (176-77). Robinson Crusoe describes shipwreck as being "*divided from mankind ... banish'd from human society*" and complains of being "reduced to a meer state of nature" (Defoe 54, 94). But he soon discovers that he is "more happy in this solitary condition, than I should have been in a liberty of society" (90). After "eight and twenty years, two months, and 19 days," Crusoe finally leaves the island with reformed concepts of individuality and sociability, to lead a prosperous and successful life in England (219).

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century social contract philosophy posits a founding narrative whereby people once lived in an original condition of indifference to one another. It presents society as a diverse body of private individuals who unite in order to protect their rights. Critics have generally focused on the ways that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature tried to embody the ideals of the social contract. Kevin Cope points to the influence of social contract theory on the emerging genre of the novel,

which attempts "[to absorb] variant individuals into the fiction of the totality" (937). According to Cope, eighteenth-century fiction and social contract theory are both concerned with constructing and solidifying a new social identity through narrative devices. Angela Esterhammer also notes the close conjunction of social contract theory, empiricism and revolutionary discourse, which compelled Romantic writers "to think about language in a pragmatic context ... [bringing] about the conditions for an intersection of politics, philosophy of language and literature" (67). Likewise, David Spadafora classifies British Romantic literature within a broader empiricist trend of optimism (389-91). He argues that "the idea of progress was the normal vision of history in high eighteenth-century Britain, and it became increasingly dominant as the period proceeded" (18). These critics all therefore acknowledge a strong connection between Romanticism, the social contract and Enlightenment philosophy, but view this relationship as straightforward and constructive.

In this dissertation, I argue that the influence of the social contract on Romantic literature was in fact largely negative, and that Romantic writers were primarily concerned with criticizing several major problems which emerge from social contract theory. The social contract proffers an empowered concept of individualism, but proposes a more troubled model of sociability. It denaturalizes the notion of obligation to others, and posits the individual as conceptually prior to the community. It suggests that people do not form societies to realize a broader social vision, or because they care for one another, but for more personal secondary gains, at best endeavoring to pool resources. At worst, ironically, this inherently individualistic theory often postulates a return to coercion, which is presented as the sole means of guaranteeing individual liberty. These

problems arise because social contract societies are founded on the paradoxical rationale of protecting individuals from the very presence of others. Social contract writers were generally aware of these theoretical difficulties uniting individuals into a social body, and of tensions between utopian individualism and dystopian sociability, but were also unable to resolve them. Instead, they engaged with these tensions indirectly through literature and rhetoric, rather than directly through their social philosophies.

This literary quality of social contract philosophy enabled its easy assimilation into eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. Following David Hume, Romantic writers read "[the] *state of nature* ... as a mere fiction, not unlike that of the *golden age*, which poets have invented" (*Treatise* 493). William Godwin's view of the novel as "endeavour[ing] by discussion and reasoning to effect a grand and comprehensive improvement ... [on society's] members" can be traced to the close intersection of literary and socio-political narratives in social contract philosophy (*Fleetwood* 49). But responding to the subversive literary subtext of social contract theory, as well as to its individualistic ethos, Romantic-era writers were inclined to focus on the failures and tensions of social contract theory in their literature. They were no longer able to perceive themselves as representatives of their society, as had been the norm in previous periods, but rather as its critics. Repeatedly, they imagine society as a conglomerate of individual parts, and literature as a site for exploring its fissures.

From a variety of perspectives, Romantic writers also mourn the loss of the former body politic model. Since antiquity, the king had symbolized the spiritual center of the community, embodying "one and the same mind" as his subjects (Virgil, *Georgics* 132). Christopher Hill notes the seventeenth century as a period of sharp transition,

whereby Charles I's assassination literally dismantled the body politic, thus "undermin[ing] men's traditional belief in the eternity of the old order in Church and state" (Hill 259). He suggests that by the eighteenth century, the contract had taken its place, dominating economics, theology and politics as the prototype for the tenuous bond between god and humans, and – by extension – between society and its members (239). Intellectual historians mark the eighteenth century as a turning-point away from the former, more cohesive body politic model, and toward individualism. Benedict Anderson dates the advent of the concept of individual imagination and concomitant narratives of community to the late eighteenth century (4). He argues that the rise of nationalism during the eighteenth century creates a shift whereby "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members ... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). Michel Foucault also identifies the eighteenth century as the historical nexus whereat the individual emerges as the dominant means of social organization (cf. *Discipline* 191; *Reader* 242). In this era of rapid demographic expansion, economic change and industrialization, responsibility for upholding the greater whole moves away from a centralized locus of power and toward the individual. Mary Poovey comments on the shift of political power from the center to the margins, which supported the more diffuse form of the emerging liberal government (7).

More than two hundred years later, Western culture remains preoccupied with reconciling the private individual to a broader social body. Jean-Luc Nancy describes the postmodern individual as the vestige of the deceased body politic tradition: "the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community. By its nature – as its name indicates, it is the atom, the indivisible – the individual reveals that it

is the abstract result of a decomposition" (3). The redefinition of community in lieu of individualism, the limits of privacy rights, public security, and the evolving role of virtual social networks, are a sample of popular debates which Howard Rheingold traces to the social contract rationale that people form communities to share "collective goods" for personal gain (2, 13).¹ I explore the origins of this influential model and its early forms of critique in British Romanticism.

The Critical Tradition

In the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," William Wordsworth connects Romantic literature to a new and "far more philosophical language" than in the past ("Preface" 124). Critics have often related this change of focus to the influx of German idealism into Britain. But this approach separates British Romanticism from its immediate empiricist context, and anachronistically affiliates it to a school of thought that seeks to elevate art into a transcendent realm. Neo-Kantianism is extraneous to much of actual Romantic literature, and belongs more to the critics. As a result, British Romanticism's canonical texts have often been viewed as idealized and politically evasive. In this section, I trace the progress of British Romanticism's relationship to German idealism from its origins in M. H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism*, through the criticisms of deconstruction in the works of Paul de Man, to its attack by new historicism. I then consider a current critical interest in the relationship between Romanticism and empiricism, from which my own works emerges. In the following section, I discuss Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the only

¹ See the popularity of the ABC television series *Lost* (2004-10), which dramatizes characters named after social contract philosophers, who form a new society on a desert island after their plane crashes.

canonical Romantic poet to have engaged significantly with German idealism.² I suggest that concepts of a social contract and of individualism are also important to his works, albeit often suppressed by Coleridge himself. Finally, I briefly examine *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1817) to demonstrate its references to the social contract tradition.

British Romanticism is often read through traditions which were obscure to the writers themselves, but which have since come to dominate our understandings of their works. Critical history and Romantic texts are therefore closely related but discrete entities. Since the Second World War, critics have standardly ascribed an idealist agenda to Romantic texts. Initially, this provided a means of reestablishing British Romanticism in the literary pantheon after the attacks of New Criticism, which discredited Romanticism as a disorganized and overly sentimental literary movement.³ Cairns Craig explains the logic of this re-contextualization of British Romanticism through the German tradition:

By reading Wordsworth and Coleridge as the English equivalents of Kant and Hegel, critics who operate in a tradition which sees Kant and Hegel as the crucial turning points of modern thought reflect back upon Wordsworth and Coleridge the philosophical significance accorded to their German contemporaries. ("Hume" 23)

According to Cairns, this idealist model of transcendence incorporates a necessary displacement "of all previous forms of aesthetic thinking, a Hegelian *Aufhebung*," which serves to marginalize the original empiricist contexts of British Romanticism ("Hume"

² The less canonical Henry Crabb Robinson also read the German idealists. See Eugene Stelzig's recent study *Henry Crabb Robinson in Germany: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Life Writing*, in which Stelzig argues that Robinson's letters to the *Monthly Register* introduced Kantian thought to England in the early 1800s (65).

³ In this context, see especially T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In discussing Wordsworth, Eliot argues: "emotion recollected in tranquility' is an inexact formula Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (96-97).

23).⁴ Sarah Zimmerman observes that Abrams's post Second World War account of Romantic transcendence not only displaced other philosophical traditions, but also came to displace the Romantic texts themselves. Abrams's account was so persuasive that "[it] gained an odd afterlife as the object of critique itself" (Zimmerman 16). David Perkins notes this tendency of critical agendas to subsume Romantic texts, reflecting "a kind of bad faith" on the part of the critic (428). A generation after Abrams's earnest attempt to rehabilitate British Romanticism from the attacks of New Criticism by forging an anachronistic parallelism with German idealism, this re-contextualization rendered Romanticism subject to attack. New historicism assigns to Romantic poetry the "common frailty [of]: bad faith" which, as Perkins argues, appertains to the critic (McGann, *Byron* 192).

In his classic *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Abrams celebrates a "change from imitation to expression" in a transition from empiricist to Romantic aesthetics (*Mirror* 57). He argues that Romantic writers separated themselves from an empiricist model which views the mind as receptive, ascribing it an active role in the construction of reality. In *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams attempts to distinguish his own approach from the former new critical appraisal "that Romantic writers evaded the political and social crises of their era by ignoring them, or by escaping into a fantasy world" (*Natural* 357). Having rejected empiricism, Abrams seeks a new context for Romanticism, and finds it in the notion that Romantic writers shared "the social, intellectual, and emotional climate" of the German idealists ("Constructing" 177; *Natural* 256). Thus, as Craig

⁴ Craig observes that the critical focus on the English-German nexus has entirely marginalized other contexts, such as Scottish Romanticism ("Hume" 22). He suggests "that the 'Romantic ideology' is ... the product of a specifically *national* mapping of Romanticism" (20).

observes, Abrams dismisses empiricism as "the dead weight from which Wordsworth and Coleridge had to release themselves before they could take flight on the wings of the Kantian transcendental" ("Kant" 43). But ironically, Abrams's postulation of this new context counterproductively perpetuated the very de-politicization of Romantic literature which he set out to correct. Effectively, his argument removed Romanticism from its immediate socio-historical setting, and yoked it to a distant, transcendental model.

Deconstructive criticism takes issue with Abrams's idealist reading of the Romantic text, whereby Abrams suggests that Romanticism overcomes "alienation from the world ... the cleavage between subject and object" (Abrams, *Mirror* 65). Instead of the German idealists, Paul de Man recontextualizes Romanticism through Rousseau's rhetoric. De Man thus resituates Romanticism firmly within the empiricist tradition, but focuses on empiricism's rhetorical aspects and excludes its political contexts. Criticizing Abrams's self-professed aspiration to "the traditional way of reading literature," he calls attention to the rhetorical complexity of the Romantic text (Abrams, "Constructing" 159). Instead of Abrams's values of universality and truth, de Man recognizes the ironic aspects of Romantic rhetoric, and privileges a non-idealist model which entails self-contradiction and questions its own premises (*Allegories* ix, 252-53). De Man contrasts Rousseau's figural pattern of self-contradiction to Abrams's postulation of a "dialectic relationship between subject and object" in the Romantic text (*Rhetoric* 208). He criticizes Abrams's "genuine and working monism," whereby dialectics eventually produce a Hegelian synthesis of subject and object (195). De Man argues that for Abrams, the Romantic text is concerned merely with "the relation of the subject toward itself ... something that resembles a radical idealism" (196). Instead of Abrams's spatial imaginary with its drive

toward holism, de Man privileges allegory for relocating "this dialectic ... entirely in the temporal relationships" (208). According to de Man, temporality allows for gaps, *aporia* and linguistic ambiguities, which spatial relationships and assumptions of unity do not facilitate.⁵ De Man focuses on rhetorical gaps in Rousseau's texts. He explains that in *The Social Contract*, Rousseau promises political change, while also discrediting its possibility (*Allegories* 275-76). He similarly observes that in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau's concept of civil society undermines his own antecedent metaphor of a state of nature (147). Likewise, de Man argues that Rousseau's model of freedom relies on the contrary imposition of limitations (139).

Thus, de Man's temporality is purely rhetorical and completely a-political. As Thomas McFarland argues, it would take new historicism to reconcile deconstruction's criticism of Abrams's simplistic model of rhetoric "with the political legacy of Marx," and to understand the genuine significance of temporal, historical relationships in Romantic rhetoric (6). Responding to deconstruction's apolitical focus, McGann foregrounds the importance of political, material contexts. He suggests, "[t]o return poetry to a human form – to see that what we read and study are poetic *works* produced by numbers of specific men and women – is perhaps the most important task now facing the world of literary criticism" (*Ideology* 160). McGann wants to move the study of literature away from de Man's chimerical concern with rhetoric, and toward historical context.

Yet it is here that the boundaries between the critical tradition and the Romantic text become profoundly confused. Despite new historicism's opposition to

⁵ In his defense against de Man's criticism, Abrams suggests that deconstructive readings are as goal-oriented and decisive as any other readings, but merely take ambiguities and *aporia* as their objects, rather than the more traditional concepts of meaning and truth ("Constructing" 156-57).

deconstruction, McGann remains influenced by de Man's view that Romantic writers lack control of their own language. In deconstruction, this lack of awareness is not specific to Romanticism, but reflects a general philosophy of language. De Man therefore argues that Rousseau is "bound to read his text" "[j]ust as any other reader," or as any other writer for that matter, with little insight into its operations (*Allegories* 277). This is because de Man believes that writers cannot master their own rhetoric. Whereas de Man reads the Romantic text as an archetype for broader linguistic patterns, new historicism judges such lapses of rhetorical self-awareness as a specific ethical flaw of the Romantic writer. Marjorie Levinson thus suggests that "most of the poems we call Romantic resist historical elucidation in particular and particularly effective ways," implying an expectation for a more direct, confrontational approach (*Period* 55). Jacques Khalip analyzes the positivist assumptions at work in McGann's and Levinson's criticisms of Romanticism, which suggests Abrams's influence. Thus, "McGann's critique recycles the same stock language of romanticism he wants to oppose – a language that privileges personality, autonomy, and self-sufficient consciousness" (Khalip 11). According to Khalip, McGann posits a "repressive hypothesis of romantic selfhood ... underwritten by the belief that in order for history to be transparent and recognizable, it has to be perceived as a palpable and personal source of confessional power" (10). Khalip notes the rhetorical simplicity of McGann's model, which overlooks more subtle dynamics of irony and evasion.

McGann thus addresses de Man's depleted view of political agency and Abrams's simplistic rhetorical model, but ascribes these to the Romantic text rather than to the Romantic critics. He recognizes that "the scholarship and criticism of Romanticism and

its works are dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations" (*Ideology* 1). But McGann inverts the causality of this confusion of Romantic and critical perspectives. Thus, he blames Romanticism for distorting current critical praxis, whereas these critical practices actually alter the way we understand Romantic texts. As Zimmerman suggests, McGann's objections pertain more to Abrams and de Man than to actual Romantic literature. However, McGann is also unable to acknowledge the true object of his criticism (20).

While rejecting the post-Second World War rehabilitation of Romanticism, McGann retains its major argument that German idealism influenced British Romanticism. Anne Mack and Jay Rome identify McGann's concern with a non-ideological neo-Kantian model of aesthetics (180). Yet instead of subverting this model, McGann actually perpetuates it in his argument that "[t]he poetry of Romanticism is everywhere marked by extreme forms of displacement and poetic conceptualization whereby the actual human issues with which the poetry is concerned are resituated in a variety of idealized localities" (*Ideology* 1). McGann borrows Abrams's transcendental model. His main difference from Abrams is in his negative appraisal of this model. Thus, McGann fails to separate his own position from that of other critics, and also does not distinguish between the later insights of criticism and the original material contexts of the texts themselves. David Punter notes that this confusion of perspectives performs "injustice to the romantics, those writers who, above all, were tremblingly aware of the inseparability of discourse and the self, politics and the inward, poetry and all those external forces" (113).

Recent studies have begun questioning assumptions about the much-criticized concepts of Romantic evasiveness and transcendence, both in relationship to Romanticism and also to empiricist philosophy. Christopher Kelly observes that the Rousseau of *The Confessions* is "a particular individual who is at the same time a general or universal individual" (45-46). James Treadwell suggests that Rousseau's construction of an antagonistic narrator who distances the reader's empathy is part of his broader enterprise of describing socialization in terms of alienation (51). Following a similar logic, Khalip posits Rousseau's Romantic evasiveness as a form of political involvement (4). Kelly, Treadwell and Khalip all thereby reclaim ostracism as a political category. In *English Romanticism and the French Tradition*, Margery Sabin proposes that if Rousseau is a particular individual at odds with society in *The Confessions*, Wordsworth reacts by modeling himself through the antithetical type of the universal epic hero in *The Prelude* (54). In the context of this recent critical reconsideration of Rousseau's "incurable maladjustment" to his social environment, Sabin's analysis of Rousseau is equally applicable to Wordsworth. If new historicism criticizes Wordsworth for inadequately representing social realities, a comparison to Rousseau emphasizes that aspects of evasion in Wordsworth's work actually indicate socio-historical awareness (75).

Introducing a 2007 collection of essays, Gavin Budge argues that empiricism had a pervasive impact on British Romanticism, eventually also influencing German idealism. Thus, he suggests that Kant incorporated elements of Scottish Common Sense philosophy into his work ("Empiricism" 12-13). By contrast, Budge notes that Abrams and others can at best point to vague "striking analogies" among German idealism and canonical Romantic works (23). He concludes that "exclusively idealist readings ... are at best

historically one-sided in that they neglect the mutual imbrications of 'empiricist' and 'idealist' positions" (24). Nancy Yousef also posits a close relationship between Enlightenment and Romantic texts. She argues that Locke's, Rousseau's, Mary Shelley's and Wordsworth's works all "present remarkably nuanced reflections on their own conceptualizations" (7).⁶ Yousef seeks to "complicate the simpler forms of juxtaposition between a past commitment to an illusory autonomous self and recent demystifications of that self," suggesting that both traditions were aware of their own textual operations (12).

Budge and Yousef do not extend their respective studies of empiricism and Romanticism to consider social contract theory. Indeed, Budge criticizes the emphasis upon the "atypical French example" of Rousseau in discussions of empiricist thought in Britain ("Science" 157). Yousef is concerned with the empiricist myth of "autonomous survival in a state outside of and prior to society" (Yousef 1). In this dissertation, I demonstrate that the social contract provides a model for Romantic writers to explore the relationship between individualism and a broader social vision. Wordsworth, Godwin, Mary Shelley and others both adopted and criticized the empiricist project of uniting isolated individuals into a larger social body. The Wordsworthian/ Coleridgean solitary is therefore a prototype for social experience in a culture of individualism, and needs to be read within this specifically social context.

Empiricism, German Idealism, and the Case of Coleridge

Although I have argued that the bias toward German idealism in Romanticism studies generally reflects critical procedures more than actual Romantic textual practices,

⁶ For a further study of the relationship between empiricism and Romanticism, see Andrew Cooper, who argues that Romantic writers such as Coleridge, Blake, and Percy Shelley criticized Hume and Locke's dualistic model of the mind as divided between skepticism and psychological affirmation (2, 12).

Coleridge is exceptional in his status as a Romantic writer who actively contributes to producing these politics. McGann suggests that nineteenth- and twentieth-century readings of Romantic-era works reflect critical models which Coleridge establishes in his texts ("Meaning" 60-61). It is therefore important to examine Coleridge's hermeneutical approach and the relations among the different philosophical traditions competing in his works. Coleridge's relationship to empiricist and social contract philosophy is roughly concurrent with his concern with German idealism. He was clearly well-versed in the works of Hume, Locke, Rousseau and others, which were readily available to 1790s British readers.⁷ The point at which he first became acquainted with German idealism is more ambiguous. John Livingston Lowes cites Coleridge's plan to translate Lessing in 1796 as an indication "that England was discovering Germany, and finding the discovery exciting" (243). But Rosemary Ashton suggests that Coleridge's interest in German idealism was clandestine during his lifetime, due to a prejudice against German culture in Britain, and only began in 1801, becoming publicly known in the 1820s (66, 58, 29).⁸ Coleridge clearly states his preference of idealism and disdain for empiricism: "[t]he pith of my system is to make the senses out of the mind – not the mind of the senses, as Locke did" (*Table* 2.179).⁹ In this section, I demonstrate that despite Coleridge's ambivalent and sometimes clearly dismissive attitude to empiricist philosophy, this tradition also formed an important influence on his works.

⁷ George Whalley notes that Coleridge borrowed Rousseau's fifteen-volume complete works from the Bristol Library in December 1797, suggesting an early familiarity with his entire oeuvre (125).

⁸ Ashton explains that during his 1797 stay in Germany, Coleridge was preoccupied with mastering basic German (32). He was therefore unable to read German idealism, which was then unavailable in translation.

⁹ Coleridge's views often changed over time, as is evident in his shift from Pantisocracy to later conservatism. His opinions on empiricist philosophers may also have changed. However, I have found Coleridge's earlier and later comments on empiricism to be similarly ambivalent.

Coleridge rejects the empiricist notion that people could ever have been *tabula rasi*, which acquire knowledge through their senses. He remarks that "[w]e learn all things indeed by *occasion* of experience; but the very facts so learned force us inwards to the antecedents" (*Biographia* 1.142). Instead of an empiricist focus on sensory perception, he suggests that reason is an active mental faculty:

[consciousness belongs] to no one Human Being, to no Society or assemblage of human beings, and least of all to the mixed multitude which makes up the PEOPLE: but entirely and exclusively to REASON itself, which ... in perfect purity is found in no man and in no body of men. (*Friend* 193-94)

Critics typically interpret Coleridge's concept of reason as a direct reference to the Kantian *noumena*.¹⁰ But Alan Barnes notes that while rejecting the "Lockean emphasis on vision as paradigmatic of knowledge," Coleridge embraces other important elements of empiricist thought (251). Barnes argues that Coleridge's discussions of time, space, and reason engage with the empiricist philosopher Thomas Reid's concept of "the mind's unanalysable intuitions of the world's reality" (252). Reid thus posits an intersubjective relationship between the individual and empirical phenomena.

Craig also analyzes an extremely complicated displacement, whereby Coleridge appropriates Hume's metaphor of billiard balls in the *Biographia Literaria*, but ascribes it to Hartley ("Hume" 27). Through this maneuver, Coleridge trivializes Hume's skeptical empiricist model by conflating it with the already then outmoded model of Hartleyan associationism, thus clearing the way for the advent of German idealism (28-29). Craig suggests that this enables Coleridge to identify with Hume's position that we have no *a priori* knowledge of the world, and only secondary information which the mind must process, but also to discredit Hume by "deflecting his criticism onto the much easier

¹⁰ See Christoph Bode (590, 592), and Mark Kipperman (34-35).

target of Hartley's physiological psychology" (28). Craig regards "this substitution of Hartley for Hume as preparation for the proclamation of the superiority of German idealism," a move "regularly represented by much of modern criticism" (29). Effectively, Coleridge appropriates Hume's idea that the mind must process empirical reality and create its own meaning, while discrediting Hume himself by ascribing his ideas to Hartley.¹¹

Nicola Trott reads Coleridge's relationship with empiricism as an ambivalent "process of self-definition," whereby Coleridge's identity is formed in relation to a hyperbolically negative portrayal of empiricist philosophers (214). Thus, Coleridge criticizes the absence of an antecedent social infrastructure in the concept of the state of nature, maintaining that this is "not only a dangerous but an absurd Theory; for what could give moral force to the Contract?" (*Biographia* 1.173) Coleridge observes that "[h]istory can scarcely produce a single example of a state dating its primary establishment from a free and mutual covenant" (175). Instead, he maintains that any such covenant must necessarily follow the establishment of the state. But, as I argue in the chapter on the social contract tradition, this is precisely the position of much of social contract theory, which posits a sharp divide between the state of nature and the state of society. Coleridge is actually far closer to empiricist thinking than he cares to admit.

Coleridge's affinity to empiricism becomes most evident in his ambivalent identification with Rousseau. Coleridge dismisses "Rousseau's philosophy" as "a mere Nothingness," which cannot account for the innate faculty of reason (*Biographia* 1.690). But he also sympathizes with Rousseau's excessive sensitivity to "the strange influences

¹¹ Coleridge may also have been influenced by Godwin's use of Hume's metaphor of billiard balls in the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. See discussion on p. 151. Paul Hamilton notes Godwin's profound influence on Coleridge's thought (41).

of his bodily temperament on his understanding," and with Rousseau's subsequent "constitutional melancholy pampered into a morbid excess by solitude" (*Friend* 134). Julie Ellison notes Coleridge's perception of Rousseau's tendency "[to display] ... the hysterical aspects of Coleridge's own writings" (423). Edward Duffy recognizes tones of identification and empathy in Coleridge's portrayal of "the crazy ROUSSEAU, the Dreamer of lovesick Tales ... the Teacher of stoic *Pride* in his principles, yet the victim of morbid *Vanity* in his feelings and conduct!" (Duffy 62; Coleridge, *Friend* 132). Coleridge thereby articulates a gap between personal affect and philosophical theory which he derives from Rousseau, but also from the social contract tradition in general, both of which generate parallel but related categories of theory and sentiment. If Coleridge acknowledges the influence of Rousseau's "morbid ... feelings and conduct" on the formation of his identity, then – by extension – he also absorbs "[Rousseau's] principles," even if he does not directly acknowledge them (Coleridge, *Friend* 132). Thus, in a manner typical of Rousseau and of the social contract tradition, Coleridge develops his identification with subversive elements of Rousseauvian individuality more extensively in his literature than in his theory.

Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1817) engages in the empiricist myth of a presocial state, from which the individual derives a new understanding of sociability.¹² But Coleridge's rewriting of the archetypal Enlightenment narrative of shipwreck and reform emphasizes the problems, rather than the virtues, of empiricism. If Robinson Crusoe finds solace on the island and happiness upon return home, the mariner

¹² In this discussion, I refer to Coleridge's 1817 version, which includes his editorial gloss. By adding this gloss, Coleridge seeks an alternative to the more esoteric and individualistic 1798 version, and appeals to a broader community. The 1817 version therefore emphasizes the theme of conflict between individualism and sociability studied in this dissertation.

experiences an inverse trajectory of breakdown and ostracism. I propose a focused allegorical reading of empiricist elements in Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which departs from eighteenth-century optimism to form a critique of its social theories. But before this discussion, a word of warning about allegorical readings of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is in order. Perkins argues that "Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' has by now achieved the classic status of omnisignificance, like *Hamlet*," whereby changing interpretive frameworks over critical history have produced competing accounts of what this notoriously ambiguous, over-determined poem actually means (425). To a similar effect, Wolfson also observes that

Coleridge is more prone to skepticism about figures than to a poetics of blithe equivalence. He is aware of how analogical reading, traditionally vested as ontologically informed, may weave relations neither predicated nor legislated by rational, analogical order; they may even be entirely fictive. (*Formal* 86)

Coleridge is inherently skeptical of any potential hypothesis formed about his extremely ambiguous text, which – as McGann observes – solicits allegorical interpretations from its readers, while also critiquing the premise of any such readings ("Meaning" 58).

In his *Table Talk*, Coleridge responded to Anna Barbauld's commentary on the poem's lack of a clear moral:

I told her that in my judgment the poem had too much moral, and that too openly obtruded on the reader. It ought to have had no more moral than the story of the merchant's sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well and throwing the shells aside, and the Genii starting up and saying he must kill the merchant, because a date shell has put out the eye of the Genii's son. (*Table* 272-73)

Through this extended simile, Coleridge expresses a Humean skepticism about assumptions of a priori moral causality. He suggests that causes are as arcane to the human understanding as the merchant's ability to anticipate harming the Genie's son. His allusion to the *Arabian Nights* (cf. *Table* 1.273 N. 7), assigns to causes the fantastic status

of fictions that people create to account for phenomena which are really beyond their comprehension. As the social contract constructs a narrative of social origins in lieu of natural sociability, so Coleridge suggests that causes are hypotheses of unknowable origins. Coleridge's preposterous simile indicates this need for fiction to account for "something unknown and mysterious, connecting the parts, beside their relation" (Hume, *Treatise* 254). But like Hume, Coleridge suggests that we must remember that these are organizing cognitive categories, and not empirical truths.

Coleridge is also skeptical about *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner's* organizing, empiricist register, suggesting that individualism is a system of social fragmentation. Initially, the ancient mariner belongs to a larger crew, whose "ship was cheered," suggesting that the mariner departs as a representative of his broader society (*Mariner* 1.21).¹³ The poem follows his change of fortune from this initial role as social emissary to his eventual predicament of social outcast. Debbie Lee notes that the mariner loses his position within the English social body. His voyage "beyond Britain's geographical borders" makes "other borders [turn] suddenly fragile" (681). She identifies a growing

rift between the mariner and his environment [which] increases during the journey itself [T]he mariner is horrified most of all by the living death of the crew and the quarantined solitude the mariner himself experiences after the crew dies He is disconnected from his environment, from himself and from other people. (Lee 692)

The mariner's compulsive repetition of his narrative perpetuates his reality of solipsistic isolation. He thereby bars the wedding guest "from the bridegroom's door," a site where social duty is performed. Elsewhere, Coleridge clearly equates the marital contract with the social contract, emphasizing that "[m]arriage ... is a social contract" (*Inquiring* 306).

¹³ Citations from the text distinguish between the part and line numbers of the poem, and the page numbers of the gloss.

Shoshana Felman notes that "*épouser*" means both to marry and to promise, belonging to J. L. Austin's "commissives/ espousals" which enact duty (20). Yet Coleridge suggests that the wedding guest's exclusion from the marital/social contracts, albeit isolating, can also be character-building.

The mariner arrives at the insight that "He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small" (*Mariner* 7.613-14). As Lee observes, this constitutes "a statement about how to relate to what is outside or other than the self," whereby the mariner learns to value each individual entity as other (694). As Steven Cole argues in his discussion of *The Friend*, Coleridge develops a concept of

personhood ... constituted by first, the capacity to recognize others as agents ... and second, the belief that others are similarly capable of recognizing my own motivation Only a reciprocal definition of personhood can explain why the very definition of personhood involves an obligation to treat others as persons. (Cole 101-02)

As a result of this approach, the mariner's interlocutor grows into "A sadder and a wiser man" (*Mariner* 7.624).¹⁴ Thus, on the one hand, Coleridge associates social fragmentation with profound isolation and suffering. Unlike Robinson Crusoe, the mariner never returns home to enjoy his original status, but "pass[es], like night, from land to land" (7.587). His overwhelming message to the wedding guest is one of isolation. The mariner stresses that he is "[a]lone, alone, all, all alone / Alone " (4.232-33). But, on the other hand, the mariner and the wedding guest eventually achieve insight into the merit of individuals as discrete entities and of their priority over universalist social narratives or contracts.

¹⁴ Some critics read this as an overly simplistic and potentially ironic ending to an extremely complex poem. See for example Michael John Kooy (para. 3).

Despite its concluding message of affirmation, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* does not set forth a singular, individual moral or narrative. Instead, McGann enumerates "four clear layers of development: (a) an original mariner's tale; (b) the ballad narrative of the story; (c) the editorial gloss added when the ballad was, we are to suppose, first printed; and (d) Coleridge's own point of view on his invented materials" ("Meaning" 50). McGann emphasizes the discontinuities among these various narrative layers, which generate a subversive, relativistic tension among competing ideologies (67). McGann's insight on conflicts among "the 'traditional concepts, schemes, and values' of Christian heritage" is also relevant to competing ideologies of individualism and sociability that emerge between the mariner's narrative and the editorial gloss (65). Coleridge introduces the gloss to frame the mariner's radically individualistic tale within a more objective, communal voice. The gloss provides essential background information which renders the poem intelligible to a wider community of readers. Thus, when the narrator relates a mysterious "FIRST VOICE" and "SECOND VOICE" which discuss the ship's rapid journey, the gloss explains: "[t]he *Mariner hath been cast into a trance; for the angelic power causeth the vessel to drive northward faster than human life could endure*" (p. 61). It also forms moral judgments: "[t]he *ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen*" (*Mariner* p. 51). Huntington Brown compares the function of the gloss to the chorus of ancient Greek drama in its authoritative, omniscient presence (324).¹⁵ But this voice remains in the margins. It draws attention to lacunae in the mariner's account, and to an overall difficulty establishing coherence. Ultimately, the gloss complicates Coleridge's position. As Wendy Wall explains, "[i]nstead of clarification, the gloss

¹⁵ H. J. Jackson argues that Coleridge develops a discrete and authoritative persona in his glosses and marginalia. She posits that Coleridge extends personal reflection beyond contemporary norms, expanding the marginal gloss into a semi-genre (xix).

obfuscates [T]he center is placed in the margins This is especially ironic since the gloss's ostensible function was to pull the poem into a whole" (182). Formally as well as thematically, the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1817) reflects empiricism's difficulty achieving social unity. Formally, the gloss draws attention to the absence of coherence. Thematically, the mariner's tale serves to exclude the guest from the wedding, subverting the enactment of the social contract with an individualist narrative of social fragmentation. The wedding still takes place, and the contract is formed, but Coleridge's focus is on the individuals excluded from it.

In his dedication to *Don Juan*, Lord Byron seeks an alternative to the Romantic concern with politics and philosophy. He compares the Lake Poets to "four and twenty blackbirds in a pie," "'A dainty dish to set before the king' / Or Regent," which sing for the conservative Prince Regent (*Juan* 1.8, 2.11-12). Thus, according to Byron, Coleridge "[explains] metaphysics to the nation," and Wordsworth expounds a "new system to perplex the sages" (2.15, 4.28). This dissertation explores the rich Romantic conjunction between politics and philosophy through the nexus of empiricist political theory. It begins with an extensive survey of the social contract and its major empiricist critics. I thereby open with a detailed discussion of Rousseau, whose influence upon the Romantic movement was the most formative, and whose dilemma between the ideological anteriority of individuality on the one hand, and the need to attain social cohesion on the other, is exemplary of the social contract legacy as a whole. Although nearly two thousand years of social theory since Aristotle had taken a largely optimistic view of society as progressing toward melioration, Rousseau discusses it in innovatively critical

terms. He opens the *Social Contract* with the highly controversial premise that "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (*Contract* 131). As an interdisciplinary writer, Rousseau also focused on the complex relations between political and literary texts, an important but understudied aspect of social contract theory which had a major influence on Romanticism.

Following this introductory discussion of Rousseau, I analyze the same pattern of interrelated political and rhetorical elements in the works of Hobbes and Locke. I then consider Hume's, Smith's, Mandeville's and Ferguson's criticisms of social contract philosophy and its approaches to rhetoric. Because they reject social contract theory's tendency to coercion, these philosophers paradoxically posit innate sociability as a sufficient motive for socialization. They suggest that the private individual chooses sociability because it best serves his interests. Yet having eliminated the model of a broader social body, these critics face the same problems as Rousseau, Hobbes, and Locke in reconciling a diverse body of individuals into a collective whole. Like the social contract philosophers, Hume, Smith, Mandeville and Ferguson also express in their uses of language concerns about excessive individualism and the absence of social coherence. Thus, despite their criticisms of the social contract, they engage in its major questions and constitute an inherent part of its legacy.

In the next three chapters of the dissertation, I read British Romanticism in terms of its reaction to the social contract tradition. As many Romantic-era writers engaged in aspects of empiricist philosophy, I have narrowed my focus to texts which are highly canonical, concerned with the relationship between literature and political theory, and

directly preoccupied with the central tenets of social contract theory.¹⁶ Wordsworth is a central figure to this dissertation, both in terms of his canonicity as arguably the archetypal Romantic poet, and also due to his more dubious status as the chief target of criticisms of Romantic evasiveness.¹⁷ I focus on *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's *magnum opus*, tracing its dynamic dialogue with Rousseau throughout its various versions and long history of revision. Wordsworth begins *The Prelude* by repeating Rousseau's pastoral pattern, whereby social retreat motivates the idealization of nature. But when power actually reverts to nature in revolutionary France, Wordsworth perceives society degenerating into a pre-civilized, Hobbesian state of nature – the negative counterpart of his previous ideal of natural society. He parts ways with the social contract, which he now associates with violence and coerciveness, and turns to his private vocation as a poet. This shift has been extensively criticized by new historicist scholarship. McGann thereby posits that "Wordsworth is precisely interested in preventing – in actively countering – such a focus of concentration [on social and economic terms]" (*Ideology* 84). But I demonstrate that Wordsworth derives this position from an encounter with Rousseau's politically radical works. Thus, Wordsworth encounters similar difficulties to Rousseau's alienated modern subjects, who experience society as hostile to individual desires.

The subsequent chapter is devoted to Godwin, whose diverse political theory and novels demonstrate a concern with social contract philosophy in general, and with Rousseau in particular. I argue against the critical consensus that Godwin had a non-

¹⁶Percy Shelley's allegorical representation of Rousseau in *The Triumph of Life* is a major example not dealt with in this dissertation. Likewise, Byron alludes to "the self-torturing sophist, wild Rousseau" in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (77.725, cf. cantos 77-81). Byron focuses on Rousseau's sentimentality, his proto-revolutionary politics, and his scandalous biography. The conservative anti-Jacobin novel also expresses important criticisms of "modern philosophy," which are considered briefly in the chapter on Godwin.

¹⁷ Ian Reid regards Wordsworth as a metonym for the institutionalization of English literary studies. He notes Wordsworth's profound canonicity, which has become synonymous with the academic discipline of English as a whole (5).

Rousseauvian political phase, and then a sentimental literary one. Instead, I suggest that political and sentimental tendencies in Godwin's works do not represent discrete chronological phases, but inherently conflicting positions of concern with the social body on the one hand, and with individual needs on the other, which Godwin inherits from Rousseau. Godwin seeks to resolve this dilemma by rejecting the social contract and adopting elements of a more traditional system of natural sociability. Yet this return to innate sociability also allows Godwin to argue that government will become obsolete and give way to anarchy. I compare *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Godwin's major work of political theory, to *Fleetwood*, in which Rousseau features as an actual character. *Fleetwood* is a philosophical psychomachia which Gary Handwerk classifies as "a novel of ideas" (Handwerk 379). Through a narrative of spousal abuse and reconciliation, Godwin formulates a critique of gender politics in Rousseau's individualistic philosophy, which excludes women from becoming full individuals. Godwin raises the possibility of female independence, but remains confined by Rousseau's constricting notion of individuality in general, and of female individuality in particular.

In the final chapter, I read *Frankenstein* as a development of Godwin's critique of Rousseau, and as arguably the most powerful Romantic indictment of the social contract tradition. If Godwin is concerned with how individualism contradicts the possibility of sociability, Shelley critiques a society that excludes its individual members. Through the monster's body, which has become an iconic object of contemporary fascination, Shelley constructs an allegory of the ills of individualism, and of subsequent social breakdown. She critiques the cultural myth that individuals are originally unconnected to one another by drawing both directly on Rousseau, and also on Mary Wollstonecraft's references to

him. I therefore study Shelley's encyclopedia entry on "Rousseau," and her allusions to her mother's writings. Wollstonecraft suggests that instead of empowering all individuals as equal members of society, Rousseau privileges men at the expense of women. Viewing writing not as an individual, but as a group enterprise, Shelley develops Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau's effacement of women and mothers. In Shelley's texts, Wollstonecraft's analysis of Rousseau's local subordination of women evolves into a global commentary on the ills of individualism in general. My dissertation thus closes with Shelley's gesture toward the reassertion of the value of community.

More than two hundred years after Shelley's, Wollstonecraft's, Godwin's, and Wordsworth's writings, questions of what unites private individuals and whether cultivating one's garden can benefit society continue to preoccupy contemporary culture. These Romantic texts, written a generation after the *Social Contract* and in the wake of the French Revolution, one of the first attempts to place the private individual at the foreground of society, anatomize the inception of this modern dilemma. Romantic icons such as Frankenstein's creature and Wordsworthian nature have retained their cultural currency partly because they provide a portal to tensions in contemporary concepts of individualism. Romanticism provides a founding contract for modern political dilemmas, the terms of which I unpack in this dissertation.

Chapter 1

Individualism as Sociability: The Social Contract, Its Critics and Its Rhetoric, 1651-1792

What causes human misery is the contradiction between our condition and our desires, between our duties and our inclinations, between nature and social institutions, between the man and the citizen. Make man united and you will make him as happy as he can be. Give him entirely to the state or leave him entirely to himself; but if you divide his heart you tear him to pieces.

(Rousseau, *Geneva Manuscript* 41)

Rousseau's social vision rests on a delicate balance between duty on the one hand and desire on the other. Paradoxically, only by fully conforming to society are Rousseau's individuals able freely to exercise their wills. At the end of his landmark novel *Julie*, Rousseau presents Julie as free to choose between marriage and an asocial agenda, represented by her affair with her lover St. Preux. But on her deathbed, she explains that she did not have genuine freedom of choice:

[E]verything within the power of my will was for my duty. If the heart, which is not in its power, was for you [St. Preux], that was a torment for me and not a crime. I have done what duty required; virtue remains to me without spot, and love has remained to me without remorse. (*Julie* 609)

Julie's death rescuing her child is clearly virtuous, but also demonstrates that submitting to societal expectations destroys the individual. Her suffering, whereby she is "[torn to] pieces" by a "contradiction between ... [her] condition and ... [her] desires," is symptomatic of a profound inner-division that pervades Rousseau's literary writings (*Geneva* 41). In *The Confessions* he explains, "I have never been able to keep a mean in my attachments and simply fulfill the duties of society. I have always been everything or nothing" (*Confessions* 437). In *Émile*, he argues that the mastery of private desires

demands rigorous self-sacrifice (*Émile* 489). Thus, although Rousseau posits the private individual as prior to social institutions, he appears unable to envision an actual space for individuals within these institutions.

This chapter analyzes both the social contract's troubled formulation of the relationship between the individual and society, and subsequent attempts in social theory to critique and reform its more individualistic elements. The rift in Rousseau's writings between the individual and society is the legacy of the previous century and a half of political discourse. In the seventeenth century, the now mundane assumption that governments serve mankind represented a novel departure from the hitherto prevalent Aristotelian model of people as innately sociable animals, subordinate to their communities. Locke's postulation that "[t]he end of government is the good of mankind" (*Second* 378) illustrates a shift in values away from the two-thousand-year-old doctrine that "the whole is necessary to the part" (Aristotle, *Politics* 11). Now the individual is seen as prior to society. As Rousseau explains, "natural man ... is the unit, the whole, dependent only on himself" (*Émile* 7). It is only with the advent of society that he becomes "the numerator of a fraction, whose value depends on its denominator ... that is, on the community" (7-8). In thus turning the traditional Aristotelian model on its head, social contract philosophers face the new challenge of finding a basis for sociability and commonality within an essentially asocial conception of human nature. Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and others formulate a social contract to negotiate the divergent needs of a body of individuals who all threaten to destroy each other in pursuit of their own best interests. To protect themselves and to best preserve their private interests, individuals form collective agreements and conventions. They devise a social contract to reconcile a

radically individualistic understanding of human nature with notions of duty and commonality as vital institutions that protect individuals from each other. Already in the nineteenth century, Otto Gierke identified a difficulty in social contract theory's ability to reconcile individuals to a community: "With the purpose of the state thus confined to the provision of external and internal security ... the sovereign commonwealth was reduced, in the last analysis, to the level of an insurance society for securing the liberty and property of individuals" (113). The foundations of such a society are extremely frail, depending on people's transient interests in paying their premiums to society, aptly described through the metaphor of group insurance, and requiring no real commitment on their behalf to the community.

I begin this chapter with an extended analysis of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (Second Discourse)* and his *Social Contract* as exemplary and influential engagements with the fraught relationship between individuality and sociability.¹ Because individuals in Rousseau's political writings lack any motive for conforming to social duty beyond mere concern with their own wellbeing, they must be forced together by a sovereign. I then explore the origin of this problem in the works of his precursors, Hobbes and Locke. Hobbes was the first canonical thinker to question the Aristotelian view of human nature as naturally sociable and to suggest that sociability needs to be created artificially by instating a sovereign.² Locke modifies Hobbes's model of external sovereignty, retaining elements of individual freedom such as the right to revolution after the establishment of government. Yet here too people lack an innate

¹ Rousseau is arguably the most directly influential social contract writer for the Romantic canon. As evident in the respective chapters on Wordsworth, Godwin and Mary Shelley, he was widely read by Romantic writers and his ideas were directly assimilated into the Romantic tradition.

² Hobbes's theory of society was strongly influenced by the lesser-known work of Hugo Grotius, whom he cites in the *Leviathan*.

inclination to sociability and must ultimately defer to authority in order to join society.

Thus, although they prioritize the individual, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau all maintain social cohesion by subordinating the private will to the sovereign's authority. Hume departs from this tradition by founding his concept of community on habit rather than external coercion. He argues that natural selfishness can evolve into sociability.

Mandeville and Smith work within a similar framework, exploring self-interest as the basis for a subsequent notion of community. I finally consider Ferguson, who retains the individual as the primary social unit, while also reviving a neo-Aristotelian model of the community as an organic entity. Hence, Hume, Mandeville, Smith and Ferguson all ground sociability in the individual's need for a larger community. These later critics of social contract theory overcome Hobbes's, Locke's and Rousseau's more oppressive models of externally enforced authority. However, as a result, they are also all left with somewhat diffuse notions of society. Eighteenth-century social theory seems to lack a viable alternative to the model of sovereignty.

From Hobbes through to Ferguson, all of the writers discussed in this chapter view rhetoric as a key means of establishing sociability. If society is to be formed through a social contract – a text stipulating civil duty – then individuals are reconciled to the community through language. Locke defines language as “the great instrument and common tie of society” (*Essay* 225). But all of these writers are also skeptical about language’s capacity actually to bridge the gaps among individuals. All too often, social contract philosophers criticize rhetoric for promoting an idiosyncratic, self-serving point of view, which is presented as reflecting the common good. As if to highlight this very tendency of language to foster self-interest in the name of collective wellbeing, Hobbes,

Locke and Hume all tacitly confuse individual and collective perspectives in their respective texts. The resulting conflations of personal and general viewpoints suggest that despite overt aspirations to the contrary, the social contract only really gives voice to one individual – the sovereign, or in this case, the author. Like his predecessors, Rousseau associates language with an individualized perspective. His literary texts explore conflicts between the individual and society which are central but less overt in his political writings. For Rousseau, language emphasizes the incompatibility of an individual viewpoint with the greater needs of society. Mandeville, Smith and Ferguson all present a more positive notion of rhetoric as upholding the community. Yet their models of community are fragmented by the multiplicity of individual wills at work in any given society. By its very nature as expressing the voice of a singular writer, language represents an individual viewpoint and seems unable to represent a more communal perspective.³ This problem becomes central to the Romantic writers discussed later in this thesis. From varying perspectives, William Wordsworth, Mary Shelley and William Godwin all dramatize the impossibility of articulating a general will.

From Natural Freedom to Social Coercion: Rousseau and Society

“What! must we destroy Societies, annihilate thine and mine, and go back to live in forests with Bears?” (Rousseau, *Inequality* 79 N.26)

Rousseau opens the *Social Contract* with the highly controversial premise that “Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains” (Rousseau, *Contract* 131).⁴ He

³ In earlier periods, epics and ballads were sometimes the product of many authors. But in the eighteenth century, the focus was on the individual writer.

⁴ Throughout this chapter, I have retained the prevalent use of the male pronoun in accordance with the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century convention which views the political subject as exclusively male. Nonetheless, more than any of the other philosophers discussed in this chapter, Rousseau is self-conscious

seeks to ameliorate duty and to redefine obligation as a virtue, a sublimation of man's individual freedom into a more sophisticated form of social freedom. Yet Rousseau never really attains this goal; duty remains fundamentally incompatible with freedom, as social relations are inevitably structured around domination and coercion. This negative view of society leads Rousseau to imagine its antithesis in an idealized presocial state.⁵ Rousseau criticizes philosophers who "[carry] over to the state of Nature ideas they had acquired in society; they spoke about savage man and they described Civil man" (*Inequality* 19). Yet Christie McDonald convincingly suggests that Rousseau's state of nature compensates for his disturbing experience of modernity: "ideal nature is the antithesis of corrupt society. In fact, it responds point by point to each evil in society; chaos is replaced by order, discord by harmony, and agitation by tranquility. That is to say, *ideal nature is the negative counterpart of evil society*" (57). This common source gives nature and society a shared set of images and themes. The sexual freedom available to natural man is derived from modern sexual excess; the uniformity of individuals in the state of nature reflects a contemporary tendency to conformity.

about the term "man" and explores the relationship between gender, sexual preferences and political identity in his writings. In *Julie*, he places a female subject at the center of the conflict between autonomy and duty, supporting his view that "[i]f there is some reform to be attempted in public morals, it must begin with domestic morals" (*Julie* 17). Through the character of Julie, he emphasizes that difference is not only socially constructed, but also biological, as expressed in Julie's appeal to St. Preux to "[c]onsider the situation of my Sex and yours" in terms of pregnancy (173). Nonetheless, in the chapter on *Frankenstein* I argue that Mary Wollstonecraft criticizes Rousseau for viewing women as lesser individuals than men.

By contrast to Rousseau, many critics note Hobbes's uncritical and at times inconsistent assumption of the dominant gender hierarchy (cf. Victoria Kahn and Mary Severance). Apparently unaware of any self-contradiction, Hobbes argues that sons are preferable to daughters, because they are physically stronger, while also arguing that Amazon women dominate men by virtue of their superior physical force (*Citizen* 113, 108). He presents all commonwealths as patriarchies, where women – classified with children as incompetent leaders – are subjected to men via the institution of marriage (110, 125).

⁵ In *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau clearly presents nature as a refuge from the frustrations of society: "I clamber up rocks and mountains, I go deep into vales and woods in order to slip away, as much as possible, from the memory of men and the attacks of the wicked" (65).

Rousseau develops a narrative whereby savagery is the antonym of decadent civilization. Natural man is a totally self-sufficient being, wanting only readily available resources to meet very basic needs: “doing only the things he knows and knowing only those things the possession of which is in his power or easily acquired, nothing should be so tranquil as his soul” (*Inequality* 86 N. 9). As a self-contained entity Rousseau's “savage lives within himself” (66). Simple wants and natural abundance render him blissfully autonomous: “I see him satisfying his hunger under an oak, quenching his thirst at the first stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that furnished his meal; and therewith his needs are satisfied” (20). Man does not need others in “the solitary way of life prescribed to us by Nature” (23). Through the state of nature, Rousseau thus describes people as independent entities, happiest alone. Human nature has no innate social principle or faculty. Rousseau disqualifies the family or a need for external authority as possible motivations for socialization, arguing against Locke and Aristotle respectively (*Contract* 132-34).⁶ As will emerge in the forthcoming discussion of Rousseau's negative view of socialization, dependence of all forms, upon others or upon resources not immediately available, alienates people, driving them from autonomy to coercion.

Following his portrayal of the state of nature, Rousseau traces a hypothetical sequence of events which led to dependence. He conjectures: “The first person who, having fenced off a plot of ground, took it into his head to say *this is mine* and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society” (*Inequality*

⁶ Rousseau is clearly in agreement with “the wise Locke” in his view of property as foundational to society (*Inequality* 48). However, he argues against Locke's opinion that conjugal loyalty exists in the state of nature (86-90 n.10).

Rousseau indignantly challenges Aristotle's opinion “that men are not naturally equal, but that some are born for slavery and others for domination” (*Contract* 133).

43). This first person whose needs exceeded his immediate environment, leading him to claim property, brought an end to autonomy. The manipulation of nature suggested by the “fenced off plot of ground” implies the creation of artificial needs, which are no longer spontaneously satiable. People must now both encroach on others and try to manipulate their environments to secure greater supplies. Even those who abstain from these measures are forced to protect themselves in order to survive. As people now function co-dependently, they cease to be autonomous:

[A]nyone who wanted to consider himself as an isolated individual, self-sufficing and independent of others, could only be utterly wretched. He could not even continue to exist, for finding the whole earth appropriated by others while he had only himself, how could he get the means of subsistence? When we leave the state of nature, we compel others to do the same. (*Émile* 187)

If independence is no longer an option, the challenge becomes managing this new reality of dependence as best as possible. Rousseau's postulation of the state of nature as a condition which probably "never existed" leads him to disdain "destroy[ing] Societies, annihilat[ing] thine and mine, and go[ing] back to live in forests with Bears" (*Inequality* 13, 79 N.26). Instead of resorting to fantasy, Rousseau explains that once people have left the state of nature, they must work in groups to protect their wellbeing and promote their property (*Émile* 186-87). He asserts: “the basis of the social compact is property, and its first condition that each person continue in the peaceful enjoyment of what belongs to him” (*Economy* 163). Property even overrides freedom, because it is more easily seized and more fundamental to survival (157). But this right “peaceful[ly to] enjoy” property is threatened by distorted needs and unequal prospects of meeting them. Rousseau laments the compromises incurred by leaving the state of nature: “Having formerly been free and independent, behold man, due to a multitude of new needs, subjected so to speak to all of

Nature and especially to his fellows, whose slave he becomes” (*Inequality* 51). In society, people are controlled by a source outside of themselves, be it others, the new scarcity of resources, or the excess of new needs.

These needs are responsible for the malaise that Rousseau perceives around him. In departing from self-sufficiency and independence, people form addictions to comfort, luxury and vice. They become sensitive to inconveniences that would not have irked natural man. Subsequently, Rousseau suggests that “[o]ur greatest ills come from the efforts made to remedy the smallest ones” (*Fragments* 40). In exchanging basic needs for decadent appetites, social man becomes a dependent and thus an incomplete entity. Rousseau describes socialization as the “mutilat[ion of] man’s constitution” in order to “transform each individual, who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole, into part of a larger whole” (*Geneva* 101). This mutilation is effected by the arts, by industry and commerce and by the sciences, which all merely perpetuate the destructive cycle of appetites and suffering.⁷ Rousseau’s special antipathy for cities is based on the view that societies become corrupt in correlation to their level of sophistication. In Paris, the otherwise virtuous St. Preux is led astray by “the vices just for show which one must possess in Paris,” namely, prostitutes and bad company (*Julie* 227). Julie ascribes his fall to this decadent environment: “Your first error is to have taken the wrong path in entering the world; the further you go, the further you go astray, and I tremble to observe that you are lost if you do not retrace your steps” (244).

⁷ In 1749, Rousseau wrote his first political treatise, a *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, in response to the Academy of Dijon’s proposed topic: “Has the restoration of the sciences and arts tended to purify morals?” (*Contract* ix). His negative response won the first prize and launched a lifelong critique of Enlightenment notions of progress.

Rousseau deems returning to the state of nature impossible. He concedes that "men like me ... can no longer nourish themselves on grass and nuts, nor do without Laws and Chiefs" (*Inequality* 79). Instead he seeks to reframe this loss as a virtue. He explains: "men become wicked and unhappy in becoming sociable ... let us attempt to draw from the ill the remedy that should cure it" (*Geneva* 20). Rousseau posits a binary opposition between nature and society: "[a] vast distance ... separates the two states" (*Inequality* 65). He explains, "Good social institutions are those best fitted to make a man unnatural, to exchange his independence for dependence, to merge the unit in the group" (*Émile* 8). Social problems can only be resolved by further socialization, by the establishment of ever-more-sophisticated institutions that address society's shortcomings. Hence, Rousseau proposes to heal society through the root cause of all social ills: man's dependence on others. If people now need each other, they must cultivate a basis of mutuality that overrides mere self-gratification. Tracy Strong observes, "what worries Rousseau about society as it is experienced in the contemporary world (his world and to a great degree still that of the West) is that the actuality of the common, the actuality of my existence *as your existence* (and yours as mine), needs to be reclaimed" (34). This common ground is absent because of what Arthur Melzer refers to as Rousseau's "rigorous and sweeping reinterpretation of the political world from the standpoint of the belief in man's asociality" (198). Rousseau is faced with the challenge of developing a society which realizes the best, rather than the worst, in the new situation of dependence given people's basic lack of a notion of commonality. People must overcome their selfishness and their servitude to the addictions of progress.

The first step toward establishing a common social ground is liberation from the unnatural desires that society has formed, which enslave human beings to themselves and each other in the redundant and abusive pursuit of fulfillment. Melzer emphasizes the imperative to overcome self-gratification now that people have become co-dependent:

[I]f men cannot be completely separated they must be completely united. They must never live with others while caring only for themselves. Hence the mission of the political solution is quite simply this: to find a form of association that completely eliminates man's natural selfishness. (Melzer 94)

Once people have lost their self-sufficiency, they must cede its accompanying selfishness if they are to benefit from each other's company. Dependence must become a virtue rather than a liability. Accordingly, Rousseau develops a concept of freedom which emphasizes autonomy rather than the debasing need for resources beyond the self. He defines freedom as the overcoming of appetite: "the impulse of appetite alone is slavery, and obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself is freedom" (*Contract* 142). Freedom is the surmounting of appetite in order to avoid abusive relations within society, enabling people to become more autonomous.

In this context, one of the first bonuses of leaving the state of nature emerges. In having developed exorbitant needs, people have also gained the opportunity to overcome them and become free. Natural man, having never needed to obey laws or abstain from appetites, never really had the opportunity to be free. Rousseau asserts:

[I]t is not so much understanding which constitutes the distinction of man among the animals, as his being a free agent. Nature commands every animal, and the Beast obeys. Man feels the same impetus, but he realizes that he is free to acquiesce or resist; and it is above all in the consciousness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is shown. (*Inequality* 26)

Rather than the standard Enlightenment argument that socialization promotes reason, Rousseau argues that it frees people from nature and appetite. This is the flipside of the challenge posed by insatiable desires. The greater the need, the greater the opportunity to rise above it.⁸ The very act of leaving the state of nature corresponds to Rousseau's definition of freedom; man resists the beast in himself, trading a primitive obedience to nature for a possible standpoint of greater servitude, but also potentially of greater self-mastery.

Thus, people transcend their new situation of dependence by asserting their autonomy over appetite. This overcoming of appetite prevents various kinds of abuse among members of society who now no longer assault each other's property or persons in pursuit of fulfillment; but it still does not guarantee a positive base for mutual coexistence and dependence, which have yet to be reinterpreted as virtues. Moreover, in a draft of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau suggests the etiology of a new variety of suffering caused by inner division among conflicting urges of autonomy and sociability:

What causes human misery is the contradiction between our condition and our desires, between our duties and our inclinations, between nature and social institutions, between the man and the citizen. Make man united and you will make him as happy as he can be. Give him entirely to the state or leave him entirely to himself; but if you divide his heart you tear him to pieces. (*Geneva* 41)

As man can no longer be entirely to himself, he must be transformed into a consistently sociable creature, devoted entirely to the state. This requires a radical overhauling of human nature. Rousseau explains:

⁸ In *Émile*, Rousseau presents a somewhat less magnanimous solution. Rather than pointing to the overcoming of desires, he proposes their abstention: "What is the cause of man's weakness? It is to be found in the disproportion between his strength and his desires. It is our passions that make us weak, for our natural strength is not enough for their satisfaction. To limit our desires comes to the same thing, therefore, as to increase our strength" (158).

One who thinks he is capable of forming a People should feel that he can, so to speak, change human nature. He must transform each individual, who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole, into a part of a larger whole from which this individual receives, in a sense, his life and his being He must, in short, take away all man's own, innate forces in order to give him forces that are foreign to him and that he cannot make use of without the help of others. (*Geneva* 101)

By substituting asocial human nature with foreign needs that require the help of others, man will be forced to recognize that needing others precludes autonomy. Rousseau thereby addresses the double standard noted by Melzer whereby people "live with others while caring only for themselves" (94).

Rousseau argues that dependence on others can be sublimated into reliance on political institutions, which are far less corrupt because they are more impersonal and less concerned with power relations. He explains that "dependence on men, being out of order, gives rise to every kind of vice, and through this master and slave become mutually depraved. If there is any cure for this social evil, it is to be found in the substitution of law for the individual" (*Émile* 58). Self-interest is channeled into a broader concern for society through the mediating faculty of the general will. This general will is the foreign element that forces man to recognize himself as a social entity (*Geneva* 101); it replaces the vices of dependence with the virtues of society (*Émile* 58). Rousseau describes the general will as the mean of all private wills: "Just as it has been said that beauty is only the combination of the most common traits, it can be said that virtue is only the collection of the most general wills" (*Fragments* 22). In joining society, people unite around shared values of "*freedom and equality*" (*Contract* 162). They trade their natural liberty for a more sophisticated form of civil freedom: "*Each of us puts all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body we receive each member*

as an indivisible part of the whole” (139). Man trades “his natural freedom and an unlimited right to everything that tempts him and that he can get” for “civil” and “moral freedom, which alone makes man truly master of himself” (141). This exchange exacts no great loss, as Rousseau equates license with servitude to appetites (*Poland* 19-20). The general will thereby addresses people’s desire for autonomy by reinforcing civil freedom. People transcend their selfish appetites and concomitant material addictions. Instead of looking inward, they look outwards towards the general will.

Through the general will, Rousseau thereby strives to reconcile the dependence of a social existence with individual freedom. In turning toward society, people turn away from the needs and appetites which would otherwise subjugate them. Melzer observes that this notion of dependence on others does not reflect “egalitarian moralism or obedience to some preexisting metaphysical or ethical imperative” (158). Rather, it represents a “horizontal” understanding of virtue as not residing in higher ends, but in the sphere of interpersonal relations (103). Instead of resorting to an external source, people must discover the voice of collectivity from within and fashion themselves toward a communal existence. Hence, Rousseau views social normativity as a construct rather than a natural or preordained entity, drawing on the varying needs of differing groups of individuals who live together out of necessity rather than choice. The general will is a practical device that secures the greatest good for the greatest number of people under the far from perfect conditions of a mutual existence. Its main function is to contain individual appetites and replace them with a more autonomous and thereby more sociable disposition, turning dependence from a vice into a virtue.

Even after the foundation of the general will, individuals remain at odds with their social situation, which is counter to their naturally self-centered disposition. Rousseau suggests that there is never a complete agreement between individual and general wills (*Contract* 145). Indeed, he ascribes the field of politics to a constant gap between the two and the consequent need perpetually to redirect errant “different interests” toward “the common interest” (147 N.). He also emphasizes that in joining society, people are only obliged to cede those aspects of their wills pertaining to society and can express other aspects (*Geneva* 95). Elsewhere, however, Rousseau erases any distinction between the private and social selves, arguing that citizens must see themselves and the state as one (*Economy* 155). Yet Rousseau is skeptical about achieving this cohesion. Always practical in his approach, he emphasizes that the general will cannot represent all aspects of society. It is not the sum total of private wills in a community, as the majority is ignorant of its best interests (*Contract* 147). Individuals are also usually unable to grasp “[o]verly general views and overly remote objects,” precluding the ability for strategizing, abstraction and broad social analysis necessary for determining the common good (156). Rousseau suggests that even despotism, which purports to subordinate a multitude to one individual, merely represses this gap between the individual and society rather than overcoming it (137). Because individuality remains fundamentally asocial, socialization must rely on conformity – on the coercion of individual volition in the name of a greater good.

Enforcing Cohesion: The Social Contradiction

“Whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body; which means only that he will be forced to be free.” (*Contract* 141)

As the general will is constantly besieged by divergent individual wills, Rousseau proposes that the common interest be secured through a social contract. The social contract is “a form of association that defends and protects the person and goods of each associate with all the common force, and by means of which each one, uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before” (*Contract* 138). Instead of collapsing individual wills into a common body, the social contract – an agreement among individuals to adhere to the general will – purports to maintain the freedom of its constituents. Yet Rousseau’s definition of freedom as the surmounting of private appetite in the interests of “common utility” renders this a less liberating proposition than it might otherwise appear (*Geneva* 94). In overcoming personal volition, but still retaining their freedom, individuals are actually required to cede all vestiges of autonomy: “Properly understood, all of these clauses come down to a single one, namely the total alienation of each associate, with all his rights, to the whole community” (*Contract* 138). The social contract thereby demands the unreserved relinquishing of individual volition. Its freedom is really tantamount to conformism, as each member of society is called upon to “[alienate] ... all his rights, to the whole community” (138). Institutions are formed to protect the private individual. Instead of bringing individuals together, it protects them from each other.

Hence, in struggling to transform naturally asocial man into a functioning member of society, Rousseau reverses his former priorities. If individuality was anterior to

sociability, now the individual becomes entirely subordinate to society. In joining the social contract, people undergo an immediate and dramatic transformation:

Instantly, in place of the private person of each contracting party, this act of association produces a moral and collective body, composed of as many members as there are voices in the assembly, which receives from this same act its unity, its common *self*, its life, and its will. (*Contract* 139)

The various members of society converge into a collective embodiment of the general will. This transformation is supposed to go largely unnoticed, because Rousseau presents the general will and the social contract as enhancing personal freedom and independence.⁹ Nonetheless, two interrelated problems emerge in the sublimation of individual wills into the general will. Firstly, how are conflicts between the individual and general will to be resolved when personal interest clashes with the greater good? This type of problem is frequent and recurrent, because of the perpetual gap between naturally asocial human nature and the socially constructed general will. Secondly, what is the nature of the collective body established by the social contract and how is it different from either its individual constituents or its individual ruler?

In response to these questions, Steven Affeldt suggests that Rousseau is less concerned with conflict between the individual and general wills than with preventing the total collapse of the private will into the general will (“Freedom” 310). The general will must remain active in terms of its constituents in order to retain its status as a will. It relies entirely on individual volition and participation for its existence, “receiv[ing] from

⁹ Neil Saccamano explains that the socially constructed social contract must be presented as natural, rather than man-made. He suggests that Rousseau sees the people as too unreasonable to be swayed by argumentative discourse; violent imposition is equally ineffective in obtaining genuine consensus. Consequently, “the legislator must wrest consensus while troping its violence as an immanent, self-moving force” (746). People must be led to believe that the social contract reflects their own natural predilections and a broader natural order, which are both in fact socially constructed by its legislator.

this same act its unity, its common *self*, its life, and its will” (Rousseau, *Contract* 139).

Therefore, according to Affeldt, “the possibility of society ... depends upon the work of individuation,” on the active involvement of individuals in the general will (“Society” 556). Affeldt suggests that Rousseau's concept of individuation involves overcoming one's conflict with the general will. Society requires “a continuous effort of self-transformative work ... [with] individuation as its central principle” (588). If people flag in this task by locating the responsibility for their existence beyond themselves, they must be shown the correct path through philosophy and education, which will lead them back to a more active participation in the general will (“Freedom” 317-18). Affeldt's argument helps elucidate Rousseau's view of the relationship between the individual and general wills as one of fruitful conflict. In *Émile*, Rousseau asserts,

[I]t is ... hard to see how we can be certain that an individual will shall always be in agreement with the general will. We should rather assume that it will always be opposed to it; for individual interest always tends to privileges, while the common interest always tends to equality. (*Émile* 511)

This friction between common and personal interests strengthens the will. Rousseau suggests that “[v]irtue is the heritage of a creature weak by nature, but strong by will; that is the whole merit of the righteous man” (*Émile* 489). As Affeldt observes, individuation is formed via disagreement with the general will.

Yet it is here that Affeldt's defense of Rousseau faces a serious challenge. He must account for the notorious solution that Rousseau gives for realigning misdirected individual wills to the general will. Rousseau posits that “whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the entire body; which means only that he will be forced to be free” (*Contract* 141). Affeldt concedes that the unfelicitous choice of the verb “force” is stronger than necessary to connote mere guidance (“Freedom” 235).

He ascribes this to emphatic purpose, drawing attention to the urgent vigilance with which society must guard the freedom of its members.¹⁰ Yet the main use of rhetoric in this passage is neither emphatic nor hyperbolic but in fact oxymoronic. The collocation of forced freedom undermines Rousseau's most cherished values in terms of the nature of freedom and the illegitimacy of force.

In the opening of the *Social Contract*, Rousseau asserts freedom as an inalienable human essence: "To renounce one's freedom is to renounce one's status as a man" (*Contract* 135). He also questions the authority of force: "Force is a physical power. I do not see what morality can result from its effects. Yielding to force is an act of necessity, not of will" (133). How can Rousseau premise the general will – the cornerstone of his social theory – on an immoral action contradictory to his conviction that "force is ... not of the will"? Rousseau dismisses this problem: "it is asked how a man can be free and forced to conform to wills that are not his own" (200). He deems "the question ... badly put. The Citizen consents to all the laws, even to those passed in spite of him." Holding an opinion contrary to the general will is a threat to one's freedom – to one's conformity to society – and must be met accordingly with force (201). Because Rousseau has redefined freedom as the fulfillment of social duty, to force someone to conform to social expectations would indeed mean being forced to be free. But the fact that individuals lack

¹⁰ In addition to Affeldt, many other critics have interpreted this passage in defense of Rousseau's general will. John Plamenatz argues that "forced to be free" refers to "obedience to self-imposed rules," as opposed to externally imposed laws requiring enforcement (324). Therefore, despite the language of external force, Plamenatz reads this passage as advocating subjective self-discipline rather than objective coercion. John Chapman suggests that Rousseau wants to prevent individuals from acquiring a level of power inimical to democracy and therefore to their freedom (39). Yet Plamenatz and Chapman's readings of this passage overlook Rousseau's somewhat unusual interpretation of freedom as conformity to social duty. According to Rousseau, subjective self-discipline and freedom are actually inseparable from external coercion and obligation. The phrase "forced to be free" therefore unavoidably invokes the loss of autonomy and the enforcement of external authority.

a true inclination toward the general will and need to be forced into compliance, and that force must be interpreted as freedom to render Rousseau's theory coherent, indicates a weakness in his notion of the general will. The basis for cohesion among individuals is deficient if Rousseau must rely on a form of power that he deems both immoral and ineffectual. As he observes toward the beginning of the *Social Contract*, slaves come to "love their servitude" and the chains that coerce them (133). Yet instead of justifying slavery, this merely attests to the power of force to pervert the individual will.

Because socialization relies on the capitulation of the individual will to the general will, individuals retain very few prerogatives in society. Although Rousseauian society is premised on individual volition – on individuals forming a social contract – people have surprisingly little say in how society is run after its establishment. In order to prevent dissent, Rousseau endows the sovereign the mandate to coerce and unify his subjects – as far as possible – into a single entity. To justify this model of exclusive sovereignty, he staunchly absolves sovereigns from any possible abuses of power: "the Sovereign, formed solely by the private individuals composing it, does not have any interest contrary to theirs. Consequently, the Sovereign power has no need of a guarantee toward the subjects, because it is impossible for the body to harm all its members" (*Contract* 140). The possibility of self-destructive bodily practices notwithstanding, this immunity is also problematized by the perpetual gap that Rousseau notes between the individual and general wills. Immediately prior to his assertion of the sovereign's unqualified authority, Rousseau reminds his reader that "[i]ndeed, each individual can, as a man, have a private will contrary to or differing from the general will he has as a citizen. His private interest can speak to him quite differently from the common interest"

(140-41). The sovereign and the people can therefore never truly form one body (140).

The people retain private interests and leadership retains an individualistic structure. The only difference between Rousseau's social model and despotic government is in the citizen's expectation of representation and subsequent disappointment.

Although Rousseau clearly exonerates sovereigns from individual interests and desires, he does concede that "the vices that make social institutions necessary are the same ones that make their abuse inevitable" (*Inequality* 62). The extent to which the sovereign embodies society as a whole, or his own personal agenda, remains a source of concern. To resolve this potential difficulty, Rousseau suggests separating sovereign and legislative power: "if one who commands men should not command laws, one who commands laws should also not command men. Otherwise his laws, ministers of his passions, would often only perpetuate his injustices" (*Contract* 155). He proposes the institution of a great legislator, who will act independently of both the sovereign and the people under the interests of all. Rousseau's strained formulation of the great legislator's role implies that this separation of interests from government is no simple task: "[s]ince the Legislator is therefore unable to use either force or reasoning, he must necessarily have recourse to another order of authority, which can win over without violence and persuade without convincing" (156). His position is compromised by a lack of political power: "one finds combined in the work of legislation two things that seem incompatible: an undertaking beyond human force and, to execute it, an authority that amounts to nothing" (156). The great legislator appears to be an ineffective means of uniting individual and collective interests.

Because the basis of socialization in human nature is secondary and artificial, society remains no more than the sum of its parts. Both sovereign and people retain an individualistic disposition which precludes the possibility of genuine commonality and predisposes them to manipulate society to their personal advantage. The people are too idiosyncratic and wayward to be granted true autonomy; the sovereign is too anxious about social disintegration and the loss of power to represent them effectively.¹¹ Caught in the middle, the legislator is not adequately equipped to resolve this conflict either. Albeit aware of the danger – as suggested by his comments on the inevitability of power being abused – Rousseau grants the sovereign absolute authority. Rousseauvian society can thus only be secured through repressive practices of forceful leadership which Rousseau strongly rejects in all other contexts. He strives to combat social disintegration by suggesting that individuals must relegate their freedom and be forced into compliance. Yet the members of this society are internally divided to the point of ineffectuality: "Ever at war with himself, hesitating between his wishes and his duties, he will be neither a man nor a citizen. He will be of no use to himself nor to others. He will be a man of our day, a Frenchman, an Englishman, one of the great middle class" (*Émile* 8). This limbo between self and society has a paralyzing effect: "Drawn this way by nature and that way by man, compelled to yield to both forces, we make a compromise and reach neither goal. We go through life struggling and hesitating and die before we have found peace" (9). Human

¹¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri observe that like other eighteenth-century political theorists, Rousseau regards democracy as "a radical, absolute proposition that requires the rule of everyone by everyone" (307). Communitarianism is threatening to Rousseau's privileging of individuality, however. He therefore opts for "elective aristocracy" as the "best and most natural political order" (242). Hardt and Negri critique Rousseau for betraying this radical potential and adhering to a model of unitary leadership. Instead, they propose "an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity (or, much less, indifference), but on what it has in common" (100).

nature's asocial origins and constitution lead to a profound disjuncture between self and society, as exemplified in *Julie*'s tragic ending.

Literature and the Individual Voice

"Great cities must have theatres; and corrupt peoples, Novels." (*Julie* 3)

The perspective of the private individual is subordinate in Rousseau's social theory, but is openly voiced in his literary works. Rousseau's shift from the genre of political theory to literature corresponds with a change of emphasis in his work from the endorsement of social institutions to their criticism. Thus, the *Social Contract* overtly affirms coercion, but Rousseau's popular novel *Julie* questions its costs. Rousseau thereby ascribes literature a secondary role, while also suggesting that its subversive qualities offer far more freedom than political discourse. He suggests that *Julie* "with its gothic aura is better suited to women than [are] books of philosophy" (*Julie* 3). Rousseau frames his novel by ironically contrasting Aristotle's model of cathartic performance with the solitary act of reading: "[g]reat cities must have theatres; and corrupt peoples, Novels. I have seen the morals of my times and I have published these letters. Would I have lived in an age when I should have thrown them into the fire!" (3). Gary Kelly identifies a tendency to separate Rousseau's sentimental, literary works from his philosophical texts from the late eighteenth century until the present ("Romance" 93). Studies of British Romanticism and Rousseau have thereby mainly focused on his sentimentalism.¹² Despite de Man's own exclusively literary focus, he acknowledges that "[t]his specialization has often prevented the correct understanding of the relations between the literary and the political aspects of Rousseau's thought" (*Allegories* 135). To a similar

¹² See for example Thomas McFarland (50-51), and David Marshall (152).

effect, Eugene Stelzig observes that only recently have critics started exploring the many connections between Rousseau's earlier theoretical writings and his later, more literary texts (*Romantic* 41-42). Thus, as Jacques Derrida argues, Rousseau's political rhetoric relies on literary language and "always hide[s] a sensory figure" (*Margins* 210). David Gauthier and Arash Abizadeh both observe the interdependence of political institutions on more private areas, such as romantic love and "[the] gendered social arena of family" (Gauthier, *Sentiment* 188; Abizadeh 570-72). From a different perspective, McDonald suggests the relationship between the state of nature and that of political government, so that private natural man and the citizen are closely related entities (105-08). Rousseau's literary texts address an intermediate zone between the private and the public, courting the reader's active engagement to form judgments regarding ambiguous statements and morally ambivalent situations.

In *The Confessions*, Rousseau discusses social obligation as a form of servitude. He prefers "the idleness of solitude" that "is free and of the will" to "the torment of constraint" experienced in "[t]he idleness of social circles" (*Confessions* 536). Rousseau demonstrates the oppressive quality of socialization in the obligation to partake in social discourse: "This unbearable constraint alone would have disgusted me with society. I find no bother more terrible than the obligation of talking on the spot and always. I do not know if this depends on my mortal aversion for all subjugation" (96-97). The same sensation arises in Rousseau's account of being "*disgusted* with the mixed life I had just been leading, half for myself and half for social circles for which I was not at all made" (430, emphasis added). Rousseau regards social conformity and obligation – adapting himself to "circles for which I was not at all made" – as an affront to his integrity, making

him live disingenuously for others rather than for himself.¹³ It is this betrayal of his will, this living by a double standard, that arouses disgust. He explains, “I have never been able to keep a mean in my attachments and simply fulfill the duties of society. I have always been everything or nothing” (437).

Rousseau’s view of conformity as a threat to his integrity suggests a tendency to favor the needs of the individual. But Rousseau also posits his resolution fairly early on “to prefer my duty to my pleasure” (*Confessions* 217). Not surprisingly, these two opposed tendencies generate intense conflict, which emerges in Rousseau’s decision to abandon his five children to a foundling hospital (299-300). Initially, Rousseau regards this as consistent with his role as a parent. He presents an orphanage upbringing as best for his children, as it will protect them from Thérèse Lavasseur’s poor background and delinquent brother (349). Eventually, one of his admirers attempts to locate and adopt these children, but with no success (467). A later admirer, Mary Shelley, critiques the bleak reality omitted from Rousseau’s perfunctory account of their abandonment: “Five of his children were thus sent to a receptacle where few survive; and those who do go through life are brutified by their situation, or depressed by the burden ever weighing at the heart, that they have not inherited the commonest right of humanity, a parent’s care” (*Lives* 334). At the end of *The Confessions*, Rousseau comes close to Shelley’s view of this act of abandonment, considering the possibility that “I had neglected my duties from which nothing could dispense me” (*Confessions* 497). This still does not prevent him from deeming himself “the best of men” (433). Nonetheless, he qualifies this claim by stating that everyone, himself included, is impure and beset by vice.

¹³ In the “Preface to a Second Letter to Bordes,” the sense of disgust is once again associated with social discourse. Rousseau asserts: “since it is time to talk openly, I am going to conquer my disgust at last and for once write for the People” (185).

In *Julie*, Rousseau moves beyond this impasse to examine the integration of individual volition into the general will. On many levels, *Julie* constitutes an allegory of the social contract. The protagonist overcomes the individual will, represented by her relationship with St. Preux, and accepts the general will, embodied by her husband, Wolmar. As Christie McDonald observes, Julie and Wolmar's household in Clarens proffers "[a] miniature treatise on political economy ... the domestic counterpart of the ideal society projected in the *Contrat social*" (136). Julie creates this "ideal society" in an attempt to redeem her failed affair with St. Preux and turn it from a vice into a virtue, much as Rousseau strives to domesticate independence in his political writings. Within "that very bower where all the misfortunes of my life began," where Julie and St. Preux's conducted their affair, she now attempts to establish respectability in her marriage to Wolmar and in her reformed, Platonic friendship with St. Preux (402). Yet despite Affeldt's notion that the general will relies on individual volition, "its common *self*, its life, and its will" also depends on absorbing the individual (*Contract* 139). Julie's marriage to Wolmar represents this submission, eventually leading to the surrender not only of desire, but also of the self, through her tragic death. Julie and St. Preux's major transgression is ostensibly their difference of rank. Yet this alone does not account for their incompatibility and for Julie's wholehearted rejection of Edward Bomston's offer to help her escape to England, where she could marry St. Preux without stigma. Rousseau raises this alternative narrative ending in order to dismiss it. Rousseau constructs Bomston as the one grotesque character in *Julie*, relegating his romantic misadventures to an appendix because they are "too novelistic to be combined with Julie's" (613). Instead of elopement, Julie must remain in her childhood home and painfully subdue her

individual desires to broader social duty. She suggests to St. Preux that the exclusive and individualistic nature of their relationship was its real obstacle to acceptability:

One does not marry in order to think solely about each other, but in order to fulfill conjointly the duties of civil life, govern the household prudently, raise one's children well. Lovers never see anyone but themselves, are endlessly occupied with each other alone, and the only thing they can do is love each other. That is not enough for Spouses who have so many other duties to attend to. (*Julie* 306)

In choosing an arranged marriage to Wolmar, her father's friend, Julie clearly opts for the duties of civil life instead of individual volition. She has overcome her private will – her desire for St. Preux – and embraced the general will in the form of her husband.

Because Rousseau's general will relies on individual volition, Wolmar integrates St. Preux into his household instead of excluding him. Having secretly possessed Julie and St. Preux's letters prior to his marriage, Wolmar knows that he is founding his estate on the site of his wife's affair (408). Far from being a threat, he considers this an asset; Julie and St. Preux's passion complements Wolmar's own self-purportedly "naturally ... tranquil soul and ... cold heart," which is starkly devoid of appetites and desires: "If I have any ruling passion it is that of observation I do not like playing a role, but only seeing others perform. I enjoy observing society, not taking part in it. If I could change the nature of my being and become a living eye, I would gladly make that exchange" (402, 403). This self-professed penchant for voyeurism predisposes Wolmar to marry Julie precisely because of her former affair, and to welcome her lover into his home in an attempt to put the individual will to common utility. As Affeldt observes, the general will has no volition of its own and must rely on individual wills to maintain its status as a will ("Society" 556). Having conformed to duty, Julie also hopes to integrate St. Preux, and render their subversive relationship consonant with broader social interests. She

anticipates that “the tenderest sentiments having attained legitimacy will be dangerous no longer” (*Julie* 551). Yet Julie’s death suggests the failure of this integration. Repeatedly, Rousseau portrays Julie as a sovereign, valiantly struggling to unite the disparate realms of passion and reason, desire and duty, husband and lover. She jokes with Wolmar and St. Preux that she lacks a sovereign’s authority. St. Preux disagrees: “Envy nothing, her husband said in a tone of voice that he should have left to me [St. Preux]; we have all long been your subjects” (457). Ultimately Julie’s subjection of passion to social duty fails; obligation literally consumes her as she drowns saving her child. On her deathbed Julie admits to “[having] long deluded myself” by denying her love to St. Preux, which now “sustains me when my strength fails me; it revives me as I lie dying” (608). Yet here too – as elsewhere in Rousseau’s oeuvre – duty proves fatal to individual volition which cannot be sustained by the general will. In Rousseau’s highly self-critical literary works and political writings, individual volition and social duty play a mutually exclusive role, undermining the coherence of utopian communities and of the private will respectively. Hence, Rousseau demonstrates that suppressed passion subverts Julie’s allegorized ideal society in Clarens; likewise, her conformity to duty destroys her will and eventually costs Julie her life.

Sovereign Individuality: Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and *On the Citizen*

“For in a way beset with those that contend, on one side for too great Liberty, and on the other side for too much Authority, ’tis hard to passe between the points of both unwounded.” (*Leviathan* 3)

Perhaps more than any other writer of the social contract tradition, Rousseau stages a conflict between society and its constituent individuals, who lack an inherent

inclination toward sociability. Yet this acute conflict is not unique to Rousseau and was a central element of social contract theory since its inception with Hobbes's *Leviathan* in 1651. Rousseau self-consciously derives the problem of the natural asociality of individuals from Hobbes, but suggests that Hobbes simplifies matters by "claim[ing] that man is naturally intrepid and seeks only to attack and fight" (*Inequality* 21). According to Rousseau, Hobbes denigrates the individualistic character of human nature, thus rendering the individual will a hostile entity that requires socialization. A close reading of the *Leviathan* and *On the Citizen* does not support this popular misconception of the presocial Hobbesian individual as necessarily belligerent. Much like Rousseauian presocial man, Hobbes's presocial person is merely a radically individualistic entity, who must be artificially directed toward socialization. The following discussion focuses on Hobbes's key influence on subsequent social thought, and on Rousseau, in terms of this attempt to reconcile an asocial notion of individuality with sociability. Albeit often simplified by later writers, Hobbes's conflict sets the stage for subsequent difficulties integrating general and collective needs.

Hobbes's memorable account of the state of nature as "a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" is read predominantly out of context by Rousseau and other eighteenth-century critics (*Leviathan* 102). Echoing Rousseau, Adam Smith deems this view of human nature "selfish and confined" (*Lectures* 57-58). Ridiculing the Hobbesian state of nature, Shaftesbury asserts that "[t]he Bug which breeds the Butterfly is more properly a *Fly*, tho without Wings, than this imaginary Creature is a *Man*" (*Moralists* 204). While critiquing "the fashionable Language of our modern philosophy" for rendering "[m]en as much

Wolves as was possible to one another ... by far more monstrous and corrupt, than with the worst Intentions, it was ever possible for the worst of 'em to become," Shaftesbury accurately ascribes Hobbes's individualistic vision of human nature to a reaction against Aristotle's model of man's natural sociability (*Communis* 66, 42). He suggests that "Tom Hobbes, whom I must confess a genius" has "so poor a spectre as the ghost of Aristotle to fight with" ("Letter" 414). Hobbes counteracts Aristotle's hierarchical view of society, positing that people were originally equal and self-governing: "hardly anyone is so naturally stupid that he does not think it better to rule himself than to let others rule him" (Hobbes, *Citizen* 49).

Therefore, Hobbes's picture of human origins is not inherently bleak, but more concerned with correcting Aristotle. Hobbes rejects Aristotle's claim that "Man is an animal born fit for Society" – and therefore for a predetermined social position – by describing the state of nature in the defiantly asocial terms of vegetable life (*Citizen* 21-22). To subvert the notion of man as a social animal, Hobbes proposes "[t]o return once again to the natural state and to look at men as if they had just emerged from the earth like mushrooms and grown up without any obligation to each other" (102). In this vegetable condition, people are not negatively disposed to each other, but simply indifferent. Yet Hobbes qualifies the implied suggestion that individuals are utterly oblivious to one another by conceding that "*infants need the help of others to live, and adults to live well. I am not therefore denying that we seek each other's company at the prompting of nature*" (24). Yet this prompting toward sociability does not translate itself into a natural model for society, which must be artificially constructed: "*man is made fit for Society not by nature, but by training*" (25). Whereas ants and bees need merely

follow their instincts to form communities, “that of men, is by Covenant only, which is Artificiall” (*Leviathan* 136).¹⁴

This artificial covenant prevents the abuses naturalized under Aristotle’s system of government, whereby “some are by nature free, so others are by nature slaves” (*Politics* 17). As Richard Tuck observes, Hobbes suggests that morality is not a natural but a political entity which needs to be tailored optimally to serve individuals (67). To emphasize society’s constructedness, Hobbes compares it to “an Artificial Animal,” a mechanism engineered “[to imitate] that Rationall and most excellent work of Nature, *Man*” (*Leviathan* 9). Elsewhere Hobbes describes society as “an automatic Clock or other fairly complex device, one cannot get to know the function of each part and wheel unless one takes it apart, and examines separately the material, shape and motion of the parts” (*Citizen* 10). The emphasis on individual parts and on the constructed nature of this mechanism departs from traditional Aristotelian models, which proffer organic cohesion. Hobbes categorically rejects Aristotle’s contention that “the city is prior in the order of nature to ... the individual. The reason for this is that the whole is necessarily prior to the part” (*Politics* 11). Here the parts unquestionably precede the whole, which is merely

¹⁴ This view of Hobbes’s state of nature as unambiguously positing the individual as anterior to society has been challenged by critics who argue that individuality cannot be considered outside of a social context. Robert Bernasconi proposes that “[i]f there is no duty, no future, and especially no language in the state of nature, there is also no individuality. The Hobbesian social contract is better understood as the means by which the individual is produced and given identity rather than as the product of individuals” (83). Althusser notes a similar difficulty with Rousseau’s social contract, which cannot qualify as a contract without there having been a preexisting society to create it (129).

David Gauthier convincingly resolves this problem by suggesting that in Hobbes’s account of the state of nature “temporal priority is a metaphor for conceptual priority” (“Ideology” 138). Hobbes does not maintain that individuals necessarily lived before society, simply that they are more important than society. The theory of the social contract is not historical, but axiological, providing a rationale for social values and relations (135). Gauthier therefore understands the individual as having greater value and priority than the contracted community. He considers man “apart from society. The fundamental characteristics of men are not products of their social existence” (138). Hume proffers a similar solution, proposing that the state of nature be read metaphorically rather than literally, as “a philosophical fiction, which never had, and never cou’d have any reality” (*Treatise* 493).

designed to reconcile them. As Sheldon Wolin argues, Hobbes articulates “the great challenge which preoccupied the political thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: if a community was not the product of nature, could it be constructed through human art?” (*Vision* 216).

The main problem with Hobbes’s artificial approach to community is the same as with Rousseau’s general will. Hobbes does not explain how inherently asocial individuals can form a basis for commonality. He resolves this problem by doing away with commonality and reducing society to one unitary individual. Where Rousseau’s model of sovereignty purports to maintain the individuality of its constituents after the foundation of society, Hobbes simplifies matters immensely by favoring an unambiguously autocratic solution. The sovereign is one man standing for the whole of society: “A commonwealth, then, (to define it) is *one person*” (*Citizen* 73). Hobbes achieves unity via the mandate of this one person, rather than by struggling to wrest consensus from a diverse group of people: “For it is the *Unity* of the Representer, not the *Unity* of the Represented, that maketh the Person *One* *Unity*, cannot otherwise be understood in Multitude” (*Leviathan* 131). Where Rousseau will become embroiled in self-contradiction, striving to construct a general will that can somehow preserve individual wills without losing its authority and by devising a great legislator to prevent sovereignty from becoming tyranny, Hobbes unambiguously rules out the possibility of multiplicity in the civil state.

As in the case of Rousseau, Hobbes formulates his rationale in practical terms that appeal to common sense. Because one ruler is less likely to contradict himself than a multitude of rulers are to contradict each other, he proposes absolutism as simply the

most effective means of minimizing conflict (*Leviathan* 214). An individual ruler has the strongest incentive for maintaining social stability by governing judiciously; the greater the monopoly, the more there is to lose. Hobbes concedes, “*he who has enough strength to protect everybody, has enough to oppress everybody. There is no hardship here, beyond the fact that human affairs can never be without some inconvenience*” (*Citizen* 84). Hobbes merely views absolutism as the least fallible means of uniting individuals into a single social body. As Tuck observes, Hobbes’s autocracy has no ideological agenda other than guaranteeing the security of its citizens (85). Quentin Skinner similarly notes that Hobbes describes sovereignty in the theatrical language of “personing” and “bearing,” suggesting that the sovereign is an actor on behalf of his people (*Visions* 81). Tuck therefore views Hobbes’s sovereign as a device for protecting individual liberty, classifying the sovereign as an emblem of moral relativism (130).

But if the sovereign represents his people and upholds a relativist type of government, what happens to individual wills in the state of society? Here Hobbes’s approach becomes less straightforward: “men do not make a clear enough distinction between a *people* and a *crowd*. A *people* is a *single* entity, with a *single* will; you can attribute *an act* to it. None of this can be said of a crowd” (*Citizen* 137). Hobbes enacts a series of displacements in this statement. His sovereign assumes the wills of the people, subsuming them into “a *single* entity” – namely, himself. If the sovereign becomes the people, then Hobbes subsequently relegates this populace to the status of an ineffectual crowd, deprived of their wills and therefore of any social agency. Hobbes emphasizes that crowds cannot make agreements or take action (76). Because a crowd consists of too many competing wills, a sovereign must preside over it and assume these prerogatives.

Hobbes sustains sovereignty by the individual wills of his subjects in accordance with Rousseau's model of a general will. Unlike the Rousseauvian general will, this sovereign does not purport to represent these wills, but rather denies their validity.

Ferguson pinpoints a major difficulty in Hobbes's thought. In Hobbes's individualistic account of human origins and nature, there is no actual basis for compact or community: "men must have already been together in society, in order to form any *compact*, and must have been in practice to move in a body, before they have concerted together for any purpose whatever" (*Principles* 2.244). If their original state was devoid of any commonality, there is no way that they could have converged and formed a community of their own accord. Ferguson resolves this problem by rejecting Hobbes's notion of presocial individuality and arguing that people always lived in communities. But Hobbes settles matters differently, by doing away with commonality. As David Gauthier observes, Hobbesian society is an attempt to preserve presocial individuality in the state of society ("Ideology" 139). The fundamental motivation for sociability is hence not social whatsoever. The social contract society is merely a fragile network of arrangements among individuals, seeking to protect and enhance their individuality, rather than establish a genuine community together (155).

Hobbes is profoundly suspicious of language. He concludes the *Leviathan* with a warning against its manipulative potential: "if there be not powerfull Eloquence, which procureth attention and consent, the effect of Reason will be little. But these are contrary Faculties; the former being grounded upon principles of Truth; the other upon Opinions already received, true or false; and upon the Passions and Interests of men" (*Leviathan* 557). Hobbes regards rhetoric as fundamentally opposed to reason. Wary of its pitfalls, he

constructs a plain speaking narratorial persona, the broad influence of which Skinner notes in the subsequent British philosophical tradition. Hobbes affects the tone of “the sane and modest *savant*, beset on all sides by fanaticism and stupidity” (Skinner, *Reason* 436-37). In the voice of this “*savant*,” he asserts “[t]here is nothing I distrust more than my Elocution; which neverthelesse I am confident (excepting the Mischances of the Presse) is not obscure” (*Leviathan* 565). In a discussion of Biblical exegesis, Hobbes notes obscure elocution as a means of tacitly promoting self-interest and subverting the truth (478-79). Hobbes asserts: “The end of one [logic] is truth, and of the other [rhetoric] exhortation For one is never separated from *wisdom*; the other almost always is” (*Citizen* 139). As Wolin observes, the prospect that “the concern of philosophy was with linguistic rather than empirical truths” is troubling to Hobbes (*Vision* 225).¹⁵ He therefore presents his own writing as extremely methodical and devoid of rhetorical or literary flourish.

Hobbes associates rhetoric and literariness with the promotion of a self-interested perspective. Explicitly, he rejects this perspective, seeking to assert the common good. Implicitly, he promotes a very individual point of view. His critique of rhetoric for failing to reflect objective facts is therefore accompanied by a familiar enlistment of rhetorical strategies to support this argument. Hobbes thereby describes the composition of *On the Citizen* as starkly lacking in inspiration: “writing slowly and painfully (for I was thinking through not composing a rhetorical exercise)” (*Citizen* 13). Yet this self-portrait of studied austerity does not accord with Hobbes’s actual use of extravagant rhetorical devices, extended metaphors, literary allusion and displays of sprezzatura. Therefore, a

¹⁵ Along similar lines, Skinner argues that Hobbes’s major objective as a rhetorician is to provide an alternative to the rhetorical practice of paradiastole, whereby vice is represented as a form of virtue (*Method* 99).

sophisticated, indirect style of precisely the kind that Hobbes overtly rejects emerges from his texts. Terence Ball points to Hobbes's rhetorical double-standard: "As if to underscore his contention that humans are apt to use language to mislead their unwary fellows, Hobbes often says one thing while doing something else entirely" (742). As Wolin remarks, "[t]he discrepancy between preachment and practice is so glaring as to be comical" (*Epic* 38).

Hobbes masquerades self-interest as collective interest, much as the singular sovereign presents his own will as that of the people (cf. *Citizen* 137). As Raia Prokhovnik observes, Hobbes's self-consciousness about rhetoric renders it highly unlikely for him to be using figurative language unwittingly (112). All metaphors must therefore be assumed as intentional. Yet Hobbes crafts his metaphors so that the reader assimilates them unawares, internalizing only their imprint (*Leviathan* 266). Thus, the state of war purports to represent the natural state of affairs under unregulated conditions. Yet on closer analysis, the military register of this image bears no relation to the natural world.¹⁶ Indeed, its indelible imprint is so powerful as to have occluded other less dramatic registers, such as Hobbes's less sensational but also more pertinent simile of the state of nature as a vegetable condition, which subverts Aristotle's model of man as a social animal.

In an essay on literary theory, Hobbes praises "far fetch'd but withal apt, instructive, and comly similitudes" ("Answer" 65). His writings abound with organic metaphors which reveal a collective social understanding contrary to his focus on individual political and rhetorical manipulations. Unlike Rousseau who regards literature

¹⁶ Wolin points to its roots in the epic tradition (*Epic* 5). Terence Ball describes the state of nature as "an extended metaphor, in which men are beasts, life is war, war is hell, and so on" (756).

as a site of individual subversion, Hobbes identifies literary language with a broader community. This is apparent in his use of medical metaphor. Hobbes describes political unrest via maladies of the social body, implying that society is a natural, living being. He discusses society as a complex whole that contains stronger elements, but that is also vulnerable to all the inherent infirmities of animal life. He thus compares the untimely abdication of sovereigns to the “biles and scabs” of a heredity disease which parents convey to their offspring (*Leviathan* 253-54). In both cases, the betrayal of an authority figure causes suffering. Political works of treason sanctioning regicide are like the “*Hydrophobia*” bought on by “the biting of a mad Dogge” (258-59). This illness produces the irrational fear of its very antidote – water as symbolic of monarchy. Hobbes also invokes epileptic seizures to illustrate the uncontrollable outcomes of bribery; threadworms explain the problem of parasitical city states (260-63). Hobbes’s innovatively constructivist, individualistic approach to society hence contains elements of a more traditional notion of society as an organic whole. He appears uncannily influenced by Aristotle’s view – which he reacts against overtly – that “the happiness of the city is the same as that of the individual” (*Politics* 254). He suggests that the body politic and the individual body are really one. Much like Rousseau’s Julie, Hobbes appears torn between a system that favors individual volition and its nemesis – social conformity. As he concedes in his dedicatory epistle to the *Leviathan*, “’tis hard to passe between the points of both unwounded” (3). These mutually interdependent systems remain unreconciled; their conflict structures Hobbes’s work and the subsequent tradition of political theory.

Self-Governing Individuals

“The end of government is the good of mankind.” (Locke, *Second* 378)

Locke adopts Hobbes’s overt concerns: his suspicion of rhetoric, his rejection of the state of nature, and first and foremost his revolutionary individualism. His major departure from Hobbes is to posit individuals as innately rational and therefore as capable of self-government. Locke dispenses with the notion of centralized authority, thus sidestepping the contradiction faced by Hobbes and Rousseau between individual freedom on the one hand and authoritarianism on the other. Yet Locke’s view of human nature as inherently rational merely magnifies the problem faced by all social contract philosophers. If individuals are free, radically indifferent to one another and now deemed rational and self-governing to boot, they lack any reason to form societies and to maintain them after their establishment. More than any other social contract philosopher, Locke emphasizes the virtues rather than the inconveniences of individualism. Consequently, more than any of his peers he must overcome the problem of solipsism and convincingly unite individuals into a community. Locke’s ambivalent attempt to dispose of sovereignty reveals the underlying weakness of the social contract notion of community, which relies on a model of centralized authority.

Locke’s concept of existence is founded upon a “*principium individuationis* ... which determines a being of any sort of a particular time and place, incommunicable to two beings of the same kind” (*Essay* 176). If no two beings are the same, all are inherently free to interpret reality distinctly; Locke posits that “we are born free as we are born rational,” able to act and think on individual terms (*Second* 291). Human nature possesses no innate structures; contingent sensory experience is the only source of

knowledge (*Essay* 19, 45). Locke's state of nature emphasizes this radical individuality. Granted, Locke concedes that because people are God's possessions, "[t]he state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges everyone. And reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind ... that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another" (*Second* 263-64). But the emphasis here is clearly on people "being all equal and independent" instead of on community. In his discussion of the state of nature, Locke strongly qualifies notions of commonality: "Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person. This nobody has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we might say, are properly his" (274). Labor is an act of individuation which creates value: "'tis labour that puts the difference of value on everything" (276, 281).

If the state of nature enables individuals to achieve full self-realization, then they lack a motive for sociability. Locke explains that although the state of nature is far from being a Hobbesian state of war, it is still unable to prevent wars (*Second* 271). Societies are formed to institutionalize and protect the primary value of the state of nature – the individual's right to own property. This radical assertion of value as inherently individualistic has generated disagreement about whether Locke's individualism is of an atomistic or communitarian character. C. B. Macpherson undermines a liberal democratic notion which he traces to Locke, critiquing "its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself" (3). Richard Ashcraft defends Locke against these charges by arguing that Locke's individuals belong to a natural community and can still remain in a

sociable state of nature after dissolving unjust governments (100, 218). This is because "Lockean natural rights are always the active fulfillment of duties owed to God," who unites all in one religion (135). Locke's description of the formation of societies supports Ashcraft's comments on the priority of community:

The only way whereby anyone divests himself of his natural liberty and puts on the bonds of civil society is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another in a secure enjoyment of their properties When any number of men have so consented to make one community or government, they are thereby presently incorporated, and make one body politic, wherein the majority have the right to act and conclude the rest.

For when any number of men have, by the consent of every individual, made a community, they have thereby made that community one body.

(Second 309-10)

In this complex passage, Locke's argument follows a similar path to that of Hobbes and Rousseau in their parallel discussions of social formation. Locke begins by asserting that society merely augments individuality to facilitate people's "comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another in a secure enjoyment of their properties." By the end, however, this individuality has been amalgamated into a now familiar "one body," wherein individual rights are subordinate to the community. Once power has changed hands and become communal property, there is no way back to the individualistic state of nature: "the power that every individual gave the society, when he entered into it, can never revert to the individual again, as long as society lasts, but will always remain in the community" (387).

Locke does not address the question of government or the maintenance of social cohesion, beyond suggesting that "the majority have the right to act and conclude the rest" (*Second* 310). Wolin points to a central problem in Locke's thought, whereby

Locke's model of leadership undermines his value of individualism (*Vision* 270). If Hobbes and Rousseau maintain cohesion by resorting to authoritarian coercion, Locke follows a similar path, albeit less directly. Wolin charges Locke with "the imposition of economic categories onto political thought with the result that the role and status of political theory came to be usurped by economic theories" (271). He sees this displacement of politics with economics as a particularly insidious means of subjugating individuals: "we can say that Locke succeeded in converting property into an ingenious instrument for silently coercing men to political obedience" (279). By pursuing economic self-interest and the procurement of property, people conform to an invisible system of coercion: "social norms ... [are] internalized and, as such, operate as the individual's conscience. Conscience thus becomes social rather than individual" (Wolin, *Vision* 307). Property and self-government are a new means of motivating individuals to subjugate their wills to the "one body" of an essentially authoritarian society. Locke's model of community ultimately proves to be no less oppressive than Hobbes's sovereign or Rousseau's general will, but merely less conspicuously authoritative.

Wolin suggests that Locke's coercive theory of social cohesion disguises itself as an individual will. In this approach to rhetoric, Locke suggests that language appears socially cohesive, but is really profoundly individualistic. Individual uses of language are idiosyncratic and therefore without value: "the very nature of words makes it almost unavoidable for many of them to be doubtful and uncertain in their significations" (*Understanding* 268). Locke emphasizes that words are really only imperfect generalizations that people devise in an attempt to overcome their innate peculiarities (235). Therefore, in his preface to *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke

suggests that only a handful of readers will actually understand his book: “Men’s principles, notions, and relishes are so different, that it is hard to find a book which pleases or displeases all men I plainly tell all my readers, except half a dozen, this treatise was not at first intended for them” (6). Linguistic relativism is problematic because language must perform the function of social cohesion and is to constitute “the great instrument and common tie of society” (225). Only language can deliver people from a predicament of solipsism, “[t]he comfort and advantage of society not being had without the communication of thoughts” (227). But all too often people abuse language to promote self-interest rather than truth (314). As words tend to conceal more than they reveal, they are vulnerable to equivocation and manipulation. For this reason, Locke negatively contrasts “*fictions* of our fancies” to the more “objective” fields of ideas and mathematical formulas (324).

This critique of language as arbitrary and individualistic is particularly incompatible with Locke’s constructivist views on value. Locke emphasizes that value is not inherent, but merely reflects that deemed praiseworthy in a given society (*Essay* 194). Although reason is innate, moral values are “*instituted* or *voluntary*, and may be distinguished from the natural” (191). By contrast to this moral relativism and praise of artifice, Locke is strongly critical of linguistic relativism and of art. He reprehends the obscure use of language whereby “the signification of words” becomes “like a mist before people’s eyes, [which] might hinder the weak parts from being discovered” (276). Thus, people become “lost in the great wood of words” (322). The use of simile and metaphor in these two respective statements is in flagrant contrast to their semantic content. While warning his readers against the obscurity of language, which expresses a

dangerously individualistic point of view, Locke uses precisely such language to advance his individual point of view. The same ambivalence between the collective and individual voice found in Rousseau and Hobbes's writings emerges here. Locke employs collective interest – the argument that language must unify society – to promote a highly individualized form of self-expression. Conversely, in his discussions of social formation, Locke emphasizes the autonomy of the individual – his innate capacities of reason and labor – while tacitly invoking an authoritarian model to uphold social cohesion. Whereas the works of Hume, Mandeville and Smith will redefine individuality as a social virtue, for Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau it remains both antonymic and essential to society. In practice, even if not entirely in principle, Locke's society remains authoritarian in structure, relying on the subordination of the individual will.

Habit and Sociability: Hume and Mandeville

“[P]rivate vices by the dexterous management of a skillful politician, may be turned to public benefits.” (Mandeville 154)

In their mission to socialize inherently asocial human nature, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau all meet an insurmountable obstacle: the individual will has no innate basis for sociability. All attempts to found such a basis fail, leading to various forms of overt and tacit coercion in a tradition otherwise firmly averse to oppression. Hume works within premises derived from these predecessors. He argues that individuals have no innate benevolence or care for one another; he mistrusts rhetoric and frequently discusses the individual as an isolated, solipsistic entity. Yet Hume turns away from the social contract tradition by locating socialization within the sphere of habit rather than political coercion. Instead of imposing various forms of absolutism from without, he devises a gradualist

model of evolving habit which eventually unites individuals into a community. Hume formulates his opposition to social contract theory:

nothing is clearer proof, that a theory of this kind is erroneous, than to find that it leads to paradoxes repugnant to the common sentiments of mankind, and to the practice and opinion of all nations and ages. The doctrine, which founds all lawful government on an *original contract*, or consent of the people, is plainly of this kind ... *absolute monarchy is inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of civil government at all.* (“Contract” 235-36)

Hume accurately pinpoints a contradiction at the heart of social contract theory between a pluralistic system of consent, and an individualistic institution of absolute monarchy which is enlisted to uphold this consent. If this “theory ... is erroneous” and “repugnant” due to the need to enforce conformity in essentially asocial human nature, Hume suggests that the basis of socialization be redefined in terms of habit. This way, people can construct a regard for one another that remains consistent with individualism, instead of having it imposed from without and collapsing back into a system of absolute monarchy.

Hume adopts Hobbes's, Locke's and Rousseau's minimalist view of human nature. He allows several moral duties to be “impelled by a natural instinct,” namely “love of children, gratitude to benefactors, pity to the unfortunate” (“Contract” 227). By and large, though, moral duties are “not supported by any original instinct” (227). Humans have no innate concern for one another: “In general, it may be affirm'd, that there is no such passion in human minds, as the love of mankind, merely as such, independent of personal qualities, of services, or of relation to ourself” (*Treatise* 481). People are primarily selfish, caring for others only when it accords with self interest. Hume asserts that “whether the passion of self-interest be esteemed vicious or virtuous, 'tis all a case; since

itself alone restrains it” (492). Individual self-interest is an amoral motivation which can operate either constructively or destructively on society.

Hume is intent on establishing ties among individuals, if not through external coercion, then via constructs of habit. Although people are primarily selfish, they are not self-sufficient. Unique among all animals, humans are unable to meet their physical needs without the assistance of others (*Treatise* 485). Society enables them to pool resources and gain both fulfillment and security. Through custom and repeated experience, people can alter their dispositions and learn to enjoy each other’s company (422). Custom fosters ties: “it not only reconciles us to anything we have long enjoy’d, but even gives us an affection for it” (503). These ties eventually appear natural: “Nay, habit is nothing but one of the principles of nature, and derives all its force from that origin” (179). Through habit people can change their constitutions, orient themselves toward sociability and devise systems of justice and government.

Hume critiques social contract theory for its radical approach to social engineering. He emphasizes that society cannot be abruptly reinvented, but must gradually evolve in response to wants and needs. Arguing against Locke, Hume asserts, “[n]ew discoveries are not to be expected in these matters. If scarce any man, till very lately, ever imagined that government was founded on compact, it is certain that it cannot, in general, have any such foundation” (“Contract” 236). Accordingly, Hume rejects the idea of the state of nature: “’tis utterly impossible for men to remain any considerable time in that savage condition, which precedes society; but that his very first state and situation may justly be esteem’d social” (*Treatise* 493). The social state is a hybrid of both the constructed and the natural:

To avoid giving offence, I must here observe, that when I deny justice to be a natural virtue, I make use of the word *natural*, only as oppos'd to *artificial* Mankind is an inventive species; and where an invention is obvious and absolutely necessary, it may be properly said to be natural. (*Treatise* 484)

Constructs of sociability constitute a form of second nature, the necessary complement of the barren incompleteness of human nature. Without these constructs, human existence indeed becomes a "savage condition" (*Treatise* 484, 493). Hence, instead of viewing the asociality of individuality as an obstacle to socialization – as do Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau – Hume presents it as a powerful motivation to overcoming an otherwise unbearable predicament. Human needs create their fulfillment – Hume deems "[m]ankind ... an inventive species" – through constructs that appear more natural than the radical individualism of unaccommodated human nature.

Hume derives his approach to rhetoric from these views on habit. He suggests that fictions are very far removed from reality (*Treatise* 10). Their limited truth-claims lack the compelling quality of history (97). For this reason, Hume posits that whereas other countries excel in literature, England's specialty is "reason and philosophy" (xvii). But although Hume regards fictions as unnatural, he also sees them as necessary tools for the comprehension of an essentially chaotic environment. Hume explains: "when objects are united by any relation, we have a strong propensity to add some new relation to them to complete the union" (237). This "necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not the objects" (165). The mind must construct fictions which are really illusions, but which are also necessary to its capacity to function. These enable "the transition of the mind from one object to another, and renders its passage ... smooth" (254). Consciousness therefore has a fictional, rhetorical structure which makes sense and creates order of an incoherent phenomenal reality.

In concluding the first book of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume describes the isolation which this rejection of “the most usual conjunctions of cause and effect” has created (*Treatise* 267). He describes his skeptical position through the literary simile of a perilous voyage:

Methinks I am like a man, who having struck on many shoals, and having narrowly escap'd ship-wreck in passing a small frith, has yet the temerity to put out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel, and even carries his ambition so far as to think of compassing the globe under these disadvantageous circumstances. (*Treatise* 263-64)

Hume's critique of ideas as fictions is imagined by the use of literary language. Once again, through rhetoric, Hume stresses the need for rhetoric and fiction, while also asserting a critical distance from these concepts. His profound isolation calls his status as a human being into question: “[I] fancy myself some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expell'd from all human commerce, and left utterly abandoned and disconsolate” (*Treatise* 264). While unquestionably expressing a very solipsistic view of human nature, the overwhelming pathos of this passage also implies a different model of sociability at play in Hume's work. Hume's view of himself as a castaway and as “some strange uncouth monster” conveys a powerful plea for empathy from his reader. His pathetic self-portrait amply suggests that if people are not naturally united into communities, they must construct them artificially in order to meet their most basic needs – or else doubt their status as human beings at all. Communities, identity, and the infrastructure which organizes our experiences of reality are all fictions necessary to human survival.

Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* takes a similar view of society as an artificial construct that works with – and not against – human nature. His poem and accompanying

commentary explore the means whereby individual self-interest builds the community. His stated goal is “[t]o show that these qualifications, which we all pretend to be ashamed of, are the great support of a flourishing society” (Mandeville 36).¹⁷ In such a society, “[t]he worst of all the Multitude / [Does] something for the Common Good” (27). If self-serving actions unwittingly benefit “the Common Good,” Mandeville is able to conclude that “*Vice is beneficial found, / When it’s by Justice lopt and bound*” (35). When correctly engineered by society, vice can be put to work for worthy causes. Mandeville views people as too innately self-centered to care for others. Because the human being is an “extraordinary selfish and headstrong, as well as [a] cunning animal ... it is impossible by force alone to make him tractable, and receive the improvements he is capable of” (36). This headstrong quality means that “consequently no species of animals is, without the curb of government, less capable of agreeing long together in multitudes than that of man” (36). It also means that man will only conform to society if he believes that he is acting of his own free will. Through various motivations of pride and vanity, people are coaxed and shamed into cooperation (41, 47). It is only the desire for recognition and the dread of criticism which motivate conformity (209). A shrewd society harnesses vices of selfish vanity for its own good, directing the need for praise and the fear of humiliation to the interests of common utility.

Mandeville’s unprecedented articulation of his argument in the form of heroic couplets expresses a novel reconciliation of rhetorical and social concerns which marks a major turning point in the social contract tradition. If previous writers covertly employed literary elements in their social writings, Mandeville renders these explicit. Literature, like pride, greed or shame, is an expression of the individual will that can be put to the

¹⁷ Citations refer to page numbers.

service of the community. As Hobbes observes, “powerfull Eloquence ... procureth attention and consent” (*Leviathan* 557). Mandeville merely removes Hobbes’s caveat that eloquence’s reliance on “Passions and Interests” renders it inferior. Instead of masking his rhetorical devices, Mandeville actively points them out to his reader. He opens his fable of the bees by stressing that this is an allegory for human society: “THESE Insects liv’d like Men, and all / Our Actions they perform’d in small” (Mandeville 23). In a similar spirit, he “compare[s] the body politic (I confess the simile very low) to a bowl of punch” (65). Thus, unlike Hobbes, Mandeville is unabashed by the direct use of rhetorical figures and satire. Adam Smith suggests that Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* draws on the register of “books of chivalry and romance, which describe the most dangerous and extravagant adventures” (“Edinburgh” 251). Locating himself within Mandeville’s tradition and adopting his positive view of the relationship between literature and social theory, Smith emphasizes that rhetorical devices are essential to narratives of the state of nature (250).¹⁸ Subsequent to Mandeville, literature and rhetoric are no longer viewed as antithetical to society, but – together with self-interest – as vital tools in community-building and the construction of social treatises. The underlying individualism of social contract societies becomes an asset, rather than an obstacle. Its

¹⁸ Smith belongs to a new generation of social theorists, influenced by Mandeville, who postulate a positive relationship among rhetoric, sociability and the nascent field of economics. Smith thereby praises the outstanding English literary imagination, and “the ingenious and eloquent M. Rousseau of Geneva” (“Edinburgh” 243; *Lectures* 205). He ascribes these achievements to the booming fiscal economy: “Opulence and commerce commonly precede the improvement of arts, and refinement of every sort” (*Lectures* 137). Opulence creates a leisure class that seeks pleasure even in its more mundane occupations. Consequently, eloquent language embellishes business transactions: “Prose is naturally the language of Business, as Poetry is of pleasure and amusement. Prose is the stile in which all the common affairs of life, all Business and Agreements, are made.... It is only when pleasure is the only thing sought after that Prose comes to be studied” (137-38). Under conditions of prosperity, prose and business fruitfully converge. Literary diction thereby becomes, to use Smith’s metaphor, richer; business becomes more pleasurable. Ferguson similarly asserts that “[t]he fine arts ... spring from the stock of society, and are the branches and foliage which adorn its prosperity, or actually contribute to the growth and vigor of the plant” (*Principles* 1.225). Like Smith, he asserts a harmonious relationship among rhetoric, sociability, individuality and the economy.

infrastructure of literary allusion, rhetorical strategy and personal agenda can be openly acknowledged and endorsed.

Society beyond Sovereignty: Smith and Ferguson

“Not that we can believe, with some theoretical writers, that ... through a sense of their wants and weaknesses, individuals met together in a large plain, entered into an original contract, and chose the tallest man present to be their governor.” (Blackstone 35)

If Hume and Mandeville still see the relationship between the individual and society as artificial, albeit – in Hume’s terms – “one that may be said natural,” Smith and Ferguson deem it entirely natural (*Treatise* 484). Individual self-interest necessarily and harmoniously furthers the interests of society without any engineering and without the need for a sovereign or analogous means of coercive intervention. With this argument, social theory comes full circle; Smith and Ferguson reconcile individualism – once a subversive and antisocial motivation – with an organic vision of society and community. They suggest that individuals are inherently predetermined to form communities and conform to society and therefore no longer need to be subjugated to a centralized authority. If this sounds like a happy ending to the conflict between the individual and society staged in this chapter, I will contend that it merely represents a shift in priorities, rather than an actual resolution. With the rise of the individual comes the concomitant demise of a viable notion of community. In this concluding section, I demonstrate that in eliminating sovereignty, Smith and Ferguson are left with weak notions of society. The lack of community in their respective works elucidates a lacuna inherent to social contract theory from its inception. The foundational works of Hobbes and Rousseau conceive of the sovereign as a purely practical solution to the problem of social cohesion;

otherwise, he is deemed extraneous. When theorists follow Hobbes and Rousseau's cue and actually extract the sovereign, his vital function becomes more apparent. As Hobbes notes, "*Unity*, cannot ... be understood in Multitude" (*Leviathan* 131). Without this unified figure, society dissolves altogether. Locke thereby tacitly reintroduces sovereignty, and Smith and Ferguson are left with incoherent notions of community.

Smith criticizes the social contract tradition for viewing individual self-interest as antithetical to society. He contests Rousseau and Mandeville's supposition "that there is in man no powerful instinct which necessarily determines him to seek society for its own sake" ("Letter" 250). Thus, like Rousseau or Mandeville, Smith posits human nature as essentially asocial and self-centered. He comments that "a man of humanity in Europe," "[i]f he were to lose his little finger to-morrow ... would not sleep tonight; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred million of his brethren [in China]" (*Theory* 157). People "feel so little for another, with whom they have no particular connexion, in comparison of what they feel for themselves" (101). Even when people do value other individuals, this does not extend itself to a broader concern for society; a regard for individuals does not entail a regard for the multitude (105). Where Smith differs from his predecessors is in reinventing this familiar idea of natural self-centeredness as a social faculty, deeming it a highly underestimated virtue. Like Mandeville, he argues that vanity and the pursuit of self-interest are powerful motivations for socialization. Unlike Mandeville, he does not regard these motivations as potential vices that require the intervention of politics. He believes that self-centeredness will always naturally benefit the community:

Regard to our own private happiness and interest, too, appear upon many occasions very laudable principles of action. The habits of oeconomy, industry,

discretion, attention, and application of thought, are generally supposed to be cultivated from self-interested motives, and at the same time are apprehended to be very praise-worthy qualities, which deserve the esteem and approbation of every body. (*Theory* 359)

Smith's goal is to remove the stigma of selfishness from self-interest and to emphasize that personal happiness necessarily contributes to social wellbeing:

Every individual is continually exerting himself to find out the most advantageous employment for whatever capital he can command. It is his own advantage, indeed, and not that of the society, which he has in view. But the study of his own advantage naturally, or rather necessarily leads him to prefer that employment which is most advantageous to the society. (*Wealth* 289)

Through the category of economic progress, Smith argues that private enterprise necessarily enhances public wealth. A benign force guarantees that individual interests will never incur abuse, but will promote universal social wellbeing.¹⁹

Smith's individualism initially appears no less radical than Locke or Hume's in its view of people as innately asocial. But Smith posits an infrastructure that guarantees a collusion of individual and collective wellbeing, uniting individuals through an underlying system of sympathy. Smith defines sympathy as the natural tendency to experience "fellow-feeling with any passion whatever" (*Theory* 13). Organizing this concept are assumptions about the universality of fellow-feeling and a natural kinship, which balances Smith's assertion of people as fundamentally selfish. In addition to sympathy, Smith posits the economy as an exemplary model for the mutual promotion of individual and collective wellbeing. In his overview of civilization, he asserts that "commerce and manufactures gradually introduced order and good government, and with

¹⁹ Albert Hirschman ascribes this naïve optimism to Smith's historical vantage point on the threshold of modern capitalism: "the idea that men pursuing their interests would be forever harmless was decisively given up only when the reality of capitalist development was in full view" (126). Similarly, Alan Macfarlane notes that Smith does not anticipate the challenges that the industrial revolution would pose to his glowing account of progress merely a generation later (148).

them the liberty and security of individuals” (*Wealth* 260). He describes the workings of this reciprocal beneficence through the memorable image of the invisible hand. Unable to consume their wealth exclusively, the rich “are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessities of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society” (*Theory* 215). The economy operates as a mystical force echoing the predestined pattern of a natural equilibrium. Ultimately, in Smith’s view, people are equal (23). Gaps of wealth actually promote this equality, because the achievements of the affluent also benefit the poor:

The house, the furniture, the clothing of the rich, in a little time, become useful to the inferior and middling ranks of people. They are able to purchase them when their superiors grow out of them, and the general accommodation of the whole people is thus gradually improved. (*Wealth* 210)

Self-interest leads people, through a concern for their own wellbeing, to unwittingly benefit others. This reflects a system, of which the invisible hand is a synecdoche. In discussing the invisible hand, Smith “take[s] pleasure in beholding the perfection of so beautiful and grand a system” (*Theory* 216). Yet he emphasizes that pleasure in its harmony must not preside over the main function of society, which is to serve its constituents. Smith is strongly critical of attempts at social engineering: “The man of system ... is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he can not suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it” (275). The man of system – identified as Hobbes later on in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* – treats society as a game of chess. He does not understand “that, in the greater chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own” (275). Smith criticizes Hobbes for regarding society as if it were a game or a work of art, which can be

masterminded by a social scientist (372). Instead, Smith suggests that broader forces reconcile the individual to society.

In doing away with social engineering and with concomitant systems of external coercion, Smith remains with a diffuse social model, governed by individual sympathy and self-interest. He suggests that society can arise from a range of motives, both profound and insignificant in nature. Hence, mutual need draws people “together by the agreeable bonds of love and affection” (*Theory* 100). But society can also be upheld by more random causes, whereby people convene “from a sense of its utility, without any mutual obligation” (100). Society can hence either meet a deep need for sociability, or simply be good for business. A thin account of society emerges from these variable motivations and from Smith’s discussion of its primary institution, the justice system. Smith extols justice as “the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society, that fabric which to raise and support seems in this world ... to have been the peculiar and darling care of Nature, must in a moment crumble into atoms” (101). But Smith describes justice in peculiarly omissive terms, given its centrality as the pillar of society: “mere justice is, upon most occasions, but a negative virtue, and only hinders us from hurting our neighbor We may often fulfill all the rules of justice by sitting still and doing nothing” (95-96). Justice, in Smith’s non-interventionist view, is simply the absence of crime.

The fabric upholding Smith’s society, which is “the peculiar and darling care of Nature,” appears frail and at times nonexistent – consisting merely of “sitting still and doing nothing” (*Theory* 101, 96). Hence, Smith appears to suffer from a problem that he identifies in Hobbes, whose work he deems purely negative. In “overturn[ing] the Old

systems of Religion and Philosophy as Hobbs ... had done,” Smith himself does not discover a new system, but eliminates social infrastructures altogether (*Lectures* 58). In rejecting Hobbes’s proposition that individuals must be artificially engineered into a group by a sovereign, Smith appears to have removed “the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice” of society, reducing it to a state of atomism (*Theory* 101). By pursuing self-interest and merely refraining from assaulting each other, individuals still do not form a positive basis for community. Like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau before him, Smith’s individualistic society lacks a principle of cohesion. Alan Macfarlane observes that the unprecedented growth of modern society from the seventeenth century onward “depended on the weakening of kinship (status) and the growth of the power of other institutions” such as economic and political structures (272). As a result, Smith and other modern theorists are left with a deficient notion of commonality. In obviating absolutism as a means of overcoming this lack, Smith is left with an insubstantial notion of society, suggested by the ephemeral image of the invisible hand, the fragmented vestige of an otherwise deceased social body.

Ferguson strives to overcome the lacuna left by the elimination of the sovereign by positing a complete unity of individual and society. He asserts that “[t]he interests of society ... and of its members are easily reconciled” (*Essay* 59). In reconciling these interests, Ferguson also unites two opposed traditions in the history of political thought. He thereby fosters Locke’s view that “the happiness of individuals is the great end of civil society” (Ferguson, *Essay* 59), while simultaneously adopting Aristotle’s assertion that society precedes the individual and that “[t]here must have been society at the birth of man” (*Principles* 1.44). Ferguson unites these divergent trends by postulating a

relationship of reciprocal harmony between the individual and society: “All nature indeed is connected; and the world itself consists of parts, which, like the stones of an arch, mutually support and are supported” (1.18). Individual and society reflect each other: “This fabric of nature, so fitly organized in the frame of every individual, is organized also in the assemblage of many individuals into one system” (165-66). Ferguson reprimands modern society for being excessively individualistic and for not recognizing this system which unites the individual with the group (*Essay* 58).

But Ferguson appears to lack a detailed idea of how the individual and society are actually to collaborate, and how social contract principles are to cohere with Aristotelianism. Ferguson’s image of society as an arch, the stones of which “mutually support and are supported,” suggests a vision of individual cooperation within the social body which he also expresses in his views on the division of labor (*Principles* 1.18). He asserts that “a people can make no great progress in the arts of life, until they have separated, and committed to different persons, the several tasks, which require a particular skill and attention” (*Essay* 172). Progress relies on the division of society into many units, all performing diverse and specialized tasks. But this division of labor also fragments society and undermines its unity: “Under the *distinction* of callings ... every individual is supposed to possess his species of talent ... and society is made to consist of parts, of which none is animated with the spirit of society itself” (207). The cohering figure of a sovereign who can animate these various parts and render the social body whole is blatantly absent.

Ferguson concurs with William Blackstone’s critique of Hobbes (cf. *Principles* 2.265), in which Blackstone ridicules the idea of sovereignty and the notion that “through

a sense of their wants and weaknesses, individuals met together in a large plain, entered into a contract, and chose the tallest man present to be their governor” (Blackstone 35). Yet without this “tallest man,” nothing remains to hold society together. Individuals lack a notion of sociability and become “parts, of which none is animated with the spirit of society itself” (Ferguson, *Essay* 207). Social contract writers fill this absence by resorting to an older model of sovereignty. But this model appears extraneous and even contradictory to its founding assumptions concerning the originary autonomy of individuals. Authoritarian notions of society lay behind the rise of novel concepts of individual autonomy and freedom. When Smith and Ferguson remove sovereignty, they encounter deficient notions of society and hence also of individuality. As a result, Locke tacitly reintroduces elements of authoritarianism without the direct figure of the sovereign. As Shaftesbury observes, the “spectre ... of Aristotle” haunts social contract philosophy, which is unable to provide an alternative to his powerful model of community (“Letter” 414). In banishing Aristotle’s authoritarian specter, social contract theory’s critics are left with a lacuna that takes the form of a ghostly invisible hand, or a vacant postulation of social harmony.

Chapter 2

Man, Nature, and Society: *The Prelude* as Wordsworth's Social Contract

Politics and Individualism

A choice that from the passions of the world
Withdrew, and fixed me in a still retreat;
Sheltered, but not to social duties lost,
Secluded, but not buried[.] (*Excursion* 5.52-55)

At the prime of his career Wordsworth came to regard social retreat as a viable political stance. In his autobiography of political coming of age, *The Prelude* (1805, 1850) and the subsequent *Excursion* (1814), he sets out to redefine the relations among “Man, Nature, and Society” in response to a novel foregrounding of the individual in recent political thought (*Excursion* p. 2).¹ Wordsworth presents withdrawal as an active form of political involvement; he is “[s]heltered, but not to social duties lost, / Secluded, but not buried” (5.53-54). By isolating himself from “the passions of the world,” he develops the highly individualized identity characteristic of empiricist political thought. Wordsworth's notion of personal freedom as the fulfillment of social duty echoes the peculiar double standard of Rousseau's *Julie*. Like Rousseau's protagonist, Wordsworth struggles to reconcile a radically individualistic notion of volition with sociability. And like Julie, he discovers a fundamental conflict between individualism and its ensuing social vision – a conflict which dictates both the form and thematics of his poetry.

This formative dialogue with individualist social philosophy has been largely neglected from studies of Wordsworth's work, exposing him to charges of social,

¹ Unless otherwise indicated by page numbers, citations from *The Excursion* refer to line numbers.

historical and political evasion. Over the last twenty-five years, critics have taken the view, here voiced by Marjorie Levinson, that Wordsworth's "primary poetic action is the suppression of the social" (*Period* 37). Alan Liu suggests that "[t]he proper title of *The Prelude*, we might say, is *History Lost*" (456). To a similar effect, Jerome McGann classifies Wordsworth's post-Revolutionary conservatism with Ezra Pound's pro-fascist *Cantos*, arguing that *The Prelude* is "another masterpiece of another common human frailty: bad faith" (*Byron* 192). In this chapter, I seek an alternative to the critical consensus that Wordsworth withdrew from political responsibility fairly early on in his career. By extending existing studies of Wordsworth and empiricist epistemology to consider his relationship to social contract theory, I argue that Wordsworth's poetry profoundly engages with the political dilemmas of his era.

The Prelude's formal, thematic and ideological structure is founded on the archetypal model of the social contract. Self-consciously citing Rousseau in his support of "the government of equal rights / And individual worth," Wordsworth posits the individual as the foundational social unit (*Prelude* 9.248-49).² Initially, he assumes that "Man, Nature, and Society" can be harmoniously integrated (*Excursion* p.2), echoing Adam Ferguson's Lockean postulation that "[t]he interests of society ... and of its members are easily reconciled" (*Essay* 59). When fissures emerge among "society ... and ... its members," as they do for Ferguson and other writers of this tradition, Wordsworth intermittently singles out and favors first nature, then individual man and finally society. He moves from an account of the state of nature, to a position of individualism and eventually to communitarianism. Through the major dramatic event of *The Prelude*, his

² Citations refer to the 1805 *Prelude*, unless otherwise indicated. Later in this chapter, I explain my choice to read the 1805 *Prelude* as the primary text. See pages 102-09.

disappointment with the French Revolution, Wordsworth critiques social contract philosophy for offering an insufficient model of commonality among members of society. His subsequent Godwinian and conservative phases constitute varied attempts to salvage remnants of the underlying individualism of the social contract. In spite of these many oscillations both within the 1805 *Prelude* and across his career, Wordsworth remains fundamentally true to his original view of the individual as the pivot of society. Yet this position exposes him to the major problem of all social contract writers: how can a basis for commonality be derived from inherently asocial individuals? In *The Excursion* and in his later 1850 version of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth eventually rejects individualism due to its inability to foster a model of social cohesion. But this rejection compromises his poetic vision, which relies on social contract theory's powerful assertion of individualism.

Far from constituting a retreat from more public forms of literature, Wordsworth's project thereby explores the relations among the individual and society over nearly half a century of work. Yet Despite Wordsworth's formative engagement with Rousseau and his persistent quest for a model of society, critics have often categorized his individualism as a form of escapism. Herbert Lindenberger reads Wordsworth's references to the revolution as veiled metaphors for spiritual struggle without any "real concern with politics" (262). Historicist methodologies of the last thirty years have disparaged this perceived avoidance of the socio-political, often connecting it to Wordsworth's conservatism. Marilyn Butler thereby compares Wordsworth's proverbial social retreat to Paul de Man's denial of his wartime Nazi sympathies. She suggests that Romantic evasion appeals to "those modern admirers of Wordsworth (especially), who have made

an icon of his poetry and sought to repeat even its significant silences in their criticism” (“Plotting” 155). Wordsworth and de Man share “a rejection of politics so comprehensive and doctrinaire that they appear to have left themselves no vocabulary in which to write analytically about their own sociopolitical positions” (153). In the same article, Butler fantasizes about an alternative Wordsworth who dies young during the Reign of Terror (133-34). Although the scenario of early death would have spared Wordsworth’s neo-Marxist critics the embarrassment of his later conservatism, it would have also foreclosed the vocabulary of his major works, all written from the conservative mid 1790s onward.

This misperception of Wordsworth’s post-revolutionary poetry as politically evasive has become entrenched in Romanticism studies. Despite the fact that Wordsworth’s shift from revolutionary to conservative politics coincided with his most prolific period of writing, critics generally question his political responsibility beyond his early radical phase, following Butler’s cue in metaphorically killing him off. James Chandler thus suggests that “*The Prelude* ... is written from an ideological perspective that is thoroughly Burkean [T]he visionary and experimental writing for which Wordsworth is revered, his program for poetry, is from its very inception impelled by powerfully conservative principles” (31-32). He suggests that Wordsworth tries to present this conservatism as a non-political position, thereby “bak[ing] his cake and claim[ing] at the same time that nature made it for him” (72). Jerome McGann proposes that *The Prelude* “annihilates its history, biographical and socio-historical alike, and replaces these particulars with a record of pure consciousness” (*Ideology* 90).³ Wordsworth cultivates “[t]he idea that poetry, or even consciousness, can set one free of the ruins of history and

³ In contrast to McGann, see Jerome Christensen, who argues that Romantic writers willfully turn to other historical contexts as a means of representing political instability (25).

culture" (91). As Anne Mack and Jay Rome suggest, McGann seeks an alternative to a neo-Kantian approach that posits aesthetics as disinterested and non-ideological (179). Sarah Zimmerman observes that neo-Kantianism is extraneous to actual Romantic literature, and belongs more to the critics than to the texts themselves (20).

Recent scholarship has begun questioning Kant's exclusive influence on British Romanticism, crediting Wordsworth with greater socio-political acumen by reading his poetry in a non-metaphysical context. As Susan Wolfson argues, new historicism denies Wordsworth's agency and self-awareness, which is shifted from the poetry to its criticism ("Questioning" 419). Levinson proposes that skepticism toward "autonomy, intention, author, and individual" precludes the need to hold Wordsworth personally responsible for failing to acknowledge history: "Wordsworth's poem does not deny its conditions of being. Neither, however, does it or could it acknowledge them, no more than the eye can see itself seeing There is no question for the revisionist critic of wishing it were otherwise" ("Revisionist" 125, 123). Skepticism toward authority notwithstanding, it must indeed be out of the question for "the revisionist critic ... [to wish] it were otherwise," as she can then claim Wordsworth's reflections on socio-historical problems as her own, arguing for oversight on the part of the poet.

New historicism's valuable reinstatement of socio-historical context thus seems unnecessarily to detract from Wordsworth's texts. In the introduction to this dissertation, I have suggested that the evacuation of political agency from Wordsworth's poetry is largely due to an overemphasis on German idealism in Romanticism studies. New historicism appears far more concerned with critiquing idealist models of transcendence in Romantic criticism than with Wordsworth's actual poetry, which – counter to popular

consensus – is not of an idealist or transcendent nature. In an 1840 retrospect of his career, Wordsworth comments that he “[had] never read a word of Kant, thank Heaven!” (*Letters* 7.49). While overestimating German idealism, critics have tended to underestimate Wordsworth’s direct references to the individualist context. Clifford Siskin thereby ascribes Wordsworth’s valorization “of development and growth” to a transcendental model of progress (*Historicity* 29, 95). Albeit critical of McGann elsewhere, Siskin shares his view that Wordsworth employs notions of interiority – in this case, of inner development – to displace conflict from the socio-political to the private domain (cf. McGann, *Ideology* 88-89).⁴ What Siskin and McGann do not consider is the politics of this domain. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century individualism is a socio-political construct essential to the ascendant form of liberal government. As Ferguson suggests, echoing Locke before him, “the happiness of individuals is the great end of civil society” (*Essay* 59).⁵ Notions of individual growth and change are not confined to the patterns of socio-political evasion noted by Siskin, McGann and others, but are essential to this new focus on the individual as the foundational social unit.

In recent years, several scholars have tried to restore socio-political responsibility to Wordsworth by considering his relationship to empiricist philosophy as an alternative context to German idealism. Nancy Yousef, Alan Bewell and Regina Hewitt study Wordsworth’s allusions to empiricist epistemology persuasively to challenge the orthodox view, here voiced by David Bromwich, that “the idea of society, and of social good as a prior fact that guides action, is alien to Wordsworth” (143). Yousef argues that

⁴ Elsewhere, Siskin suggests that McGann falls prey to the same Romantic mystique of development of which he is otherwise so critical (*Historicity* 63). His inadvertent espousal of the Romantic notion of progress renders him complicit with the “Romantic ideology,” like other pro-Romantic scholars, such as Abrams and Hartman, from whom McGann tries to distance himself.

⁵ Ferguson repeats Locke’s assertion that “[t]he end of government is the good of mankind” (*Second* 378).

Wordsworth challenges the empiricist myth of people as originally autonomous by presenting the individual as developing via social interactions (118). She identifies two antithetical models of development at work in *The Prelude*. On the one hand, Wordsworth evokes an empiricist myth of the subject as an independent, free-growing seedling (Yousef 141), referring to his childhood as “[f]air seed-time” (*Prelude* 1.306). On the other hand, in the “Blessed babe” passage, Wordsworth portrays the individual as evolving through social interactions (2.237-79). Wordsworth’s emphasis on the infant’s dependence suggests a communitarian model that trumps the empiricist fiction of original autonomy (Yousef 118). His emergent critique of autonomy leads Yousef to propose that *The Prelude* be read within

the philosophical tradition that preceded it rather than that with which it happens to be contemporary The poem recognizably brings together features of the sylvan, idyllic state of nature ... and elements of the empiricist narrative of the mind’s gradual acquisition of knowledge from sensation and experience. (Yousef 117)

While astutely locating Wordsworth’s work within the empiricist tradition, Yousef does not consider his engagement with autonomy or individuality after the formation of society. Her analysis is concerned with Wordsworth’s account of origins.

Like Yousef, Bewell also explores Wordsworth’s fascination with empiricist narratives of epistemological growth. He studies the empiricist background to Wordsworth’s commentary on marginalized social outcasts that serve as “test-cases” for the limits of consciousness (*Enlightenment* 28). But Bewell does not consider the social contract narrative of the state of nature or of the state of society as informing contexts for Wordsworth’s poetry. Elsewhere, he critiques the new historicist assumption that nature is “the favorite hiding place of the political, the social, the ideological,” and “the

antithesis of history” in Romantic era literature (“Rethinking” 1). Yet rather than connecting Romantic nature to notions of the state of nature, Bewell repoliticizes nature by examining its history in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial expansion (3).

If Yousef and Bewell focus on Wordsworth’s interest in empiricist narratives of origins, Hewitt extends her analysis to consider its sociological effects. Attending primarily to Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *The Excursion*, she observes that empiricism’s emphasis on individual perception yields a “chimerical idea of community” in which people lose their “ties to each other and the environment” (viii, vii). Empiricist epistemology generates an empirical dilemma, whereby philosophy’s new emphasis on subjective perception disrupts the notion of commonality requisite to society. Wordsworth comments on this crisis in concepts of community “the consequences of which are only now coming into view” (Hewitt 189). Hewitt suggests that Wordsworth does not so much retreat from society as point to the more general retreat of a unifying concept of society. She understands his insights into the solipsism underlying empiricism as “till[ing] the intellectual soil in which would grow the realization that perceptions cannot be shared” (189). In response to this newly decentered social model, Wordsworth designs an inductive mode of poetry which fosters his readers’ individual judgments.

Although my analysis comes close to Hewitt’s, we address different areas of empiricist theory and of Wordsworth’s works. I focus on *The Prelude*’s relationship to Rousseau’s social theory. Critics widely agree upon *The Excursion*’s conservative agenda. By contrast, *The Prelude* – a text far more frequently read and taught – has been the target of major controversy. It is therefore important to consider *The Prelude*’s direct

references to politics and history. In reading *The Excursion*, Hewitt comments that Wordsworth “challenges the idea of philosophical authority and completeness. Instead of proposing a new and full system for readers to adopt, it stimulates them to greater self-reliance” (184).⁶ These comments on Wordsworth’s empowerment of the reader, who alone can ascertain how his text is to be read, may explain new historicism’s ubiquitous claim that Wordsworth’s poems require the supplementary insight of the critic. New historicism merely fails to recognize that Wordsworth’s poems are intentionally open-ended. As Hewitt observes, Wordsworth deliberately divulges himself of exclusive authority in order to construct the type of self-reliant and active reader who can function in a society lacking in cohering structures. The onus of community comes to rest upon individuals, rather than overarching institutions or texts.

Individual Form

“[A] long poem upon the formation of my own mind[.]” (Wordsworth, *Letters* 6.680)

Wordsworth’s poetry seeks to promote values of individual freedom and autonomy through an open-ended approach to form and composition. However, his ensuing loose and sometimes unconventional approach to poetic form has incited a level of controversy that spirals far beyond his modest intention of stimulating independent thought in his readers. Critics have presented the ambiguous diction and many versions of Wordsworth’s poems as serious obstacles to their most basic intelligibility. Francis Jeffrey, among the first to criticize Wordsworth’s approach to form, rejects his open-

⁶ Although Hewitt’s argument is extremely useful for understanding Wordsworth’s emphasis on the individual, on his foreclosure of authority and on his approach to empiricism, I disagree with this specific appraisal of *The Excursion*. See p. 125 for my discussion of Hewitt’s reading of this poem.

ended use of language.⁷ In his review of *The Excursion*, Jeffrey argues that Wordsworth is “more obscure than a Pindaric poet of the seventeenth century” (459). As a result, “[t]he doctrine which ... [*The Excursion*] is intended to enforce, we are by no means certain that we have discovered” (460). In his 1815 “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800),” Wordsworth retaliates by rejecting Jeffrey’s model of authorial enforcement and readerly subservience:⁸

Is it to be supposed that the reader can make progress of this kind, like an Indian prince or general – stretched on his palanquin, and borne by his slaves? No; he is invigorated and inspirited by his Leader, in order that he may exert himself; for he cannot proceed in quiescence, he cannot be carried like a dead weight. Therefore to create taste is to call forth and bestow power. (“Essay” 82)

Wordsworth invokes this colonial register of oriental despotism to propose a redeployment of power whereby the private reader becomes an agent in social and semantic formation, rather than a redundant “dead weight” predetermined by a despotic society or text. Literature is not a means of enforcing duty, but a site for negotiating individual freedom and responsibility.

The famous Simplon Pass episode of *The Prelude* provides a model for understanding Wordsworth’s formal strategies of individual empowerment. Wordsworth describes the realization that he has unwittingly crossed the Alps as a moment of jarring dissonance which paradoxically yields insight into his vocation as a poet:

I was lost as in a cloud,
Halted without a struggle to break through,

⁷ Jeffrey lists the sheer length of Wordsworth’s poetry, its didacticism – involving “a series of long sermons and harangues” – and Wordsworth’s predilection for “eminently fantastic, obscure, and affected” diction as the major factors inhibiting its clarity (458, 459, 460).

⁸ See Gill’s discussion of Wordsworth’s writing of the “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” in 1815 as a direct response to Jeffrey’s devastating review of *The Excursion* for the *Edinburgh Review* in November 1814 (*Life* 305-07). Wordsworth clearly did not intend his encouragement of readerly autonomy to encompass the outright rejection of his poetic system.

And now recovering to my Soul I say
 I recognize thy glory; in such strength
 Of usurpation, in such visitings
 Of awful promise, when the light of sense
 Goes out in flashes ...

 Our destiny, our nature, and our home
 Is with infinitude, and only there,
 With hope it is, hope that can never die,
 Effort, and expectation, and desire,
 And something evermore about to be. (*Prelude* 6.529-42)

The many enjambments in this passage enact “the light of sense / Go[ing] out in flashes,” the frustrated expectation which yields first confusion and then “hope... hope that can never die” in the notion that fulfillment still awaits Wordsworth as a goal now relocated to his own mind. Completion becomes a property of the percipient individual rather than an objective reality. By positing the individual will as the primary value of his poetry, Wordsworth staves off the danger of devolving into a "dead weight" lacking in agency and authority (Wordsworth, "Essay" 82). By focusing on an indeterminate object, Wordsworth's own volition comes to the fore as the ultimate goal of his quest.

In reading this passage, Liu argues that individual empowerment is achieved through the denial of history. He notes the military register of “usurpation,” “struggle” and “glory” and the geographical locus of the Alps as veiled references to Napoleon's seizing of power in the 18 Brumaire (25). According to Liu, Wordsworth develops a “method” in this passage whereby he both invokes and conceals Napoleon so that he can appropriate his power without the accompanying stigma of tyranny (30). History is thus “cleansed of tyranny so that only the shining ‘genius’ figured by Napoleon – and shared by the poet – will remain” (30). Yet Wordsworth seems preoccupied with avoiding precisely such gestures of tyranny and authoritarian imposition in a passage so intent

upon encouraging the freedom of individual judgment and perception. Wordsworth's poetics are grounded in the empowerment of the individual will and in the resistance to absolute systems and texts.

Wordsworth expresses this formal resistance to authoritarian imposition both by laying the onus of interpretation on the reader, or – in the case of this passage – the percipient subject, and also by actually avoiding ending *The Prelude*. Compulsive revision is among the few fixtures of this perpetually evolving and palimpsestic project, undermining Wordsworth's own authority and that of his readers in their ability to master his text coherently. The various versions of *The Prelude* present conflicting approaches to its central questions and, counter to Wordsworth's intention, have come to compete for the status of definitive version.⁹ Wordsworth first adapted the original 1798-99 two-book inception of *The Prelude* into a five-book draft in 1804.¹⁰ In 1805 it became a thirteen-book poem that was reworked to a fourteen-book version in 1816-19 and altered again in 1832 and 1838-39 (Wordsworth, Abrams and Gill 512-26). Whereas the two- and five-part *Preludes* focus on Wordsworth's childhood and youth before his engagements with society and politics, the thirteen- and fourteen-book *Preludes* are both explicitly political in subject matter. The 1805 version incorporates Wordsworth's residences in London and Revolutionary France and his subsequent crisis and recovery. Significant changes to the

⁹ Wordsworth intended the 1850 *Prelude* to be published after his death as a source of income for his beneficiaries (*Letters* 6.680). Accordingly, its circulation was limited until the end of the nineteenth century (Gill *Life* 2). The 1805 version, which was never intended for publication, first became available in 1926 (Wordsworth, Abrams and Gill 567). Since then, the two- and five-part *Preludes* have both been published as discrete versions. Although Wordsworth intentionally challenged his readers to form ideologically independent readings of his text, he clearly never intended them to be able to choose among the ideologically discrete 1799, 1804 and 1805 texts. There is no reason to doubt his 1830 assertion of "the importance I attach to following strictly the last copy of the text of an Author" (*Letters* 5.236).

¹⁰ The five-book *Prelude* was an eight-week project, providing an account of Wordsworth's enlightenment education up until the French Revolution (Jonathan Wordsworth, "Five-Book" 1-2, Chandler 98). The two- and five-part *Preludes* engage primarily in Wordsworth's growth in nature before his entrance into social life.

1850 *Prelude* include a more conservative perspective, suggested by a eulogy to Edmund Burke (1850 7.512-43), and the division of Book Ten into two discrete books, which create a clearer distinction between Wordsworth's disillusionments with the French Revolution and with Godwinism as separate episodes – thus extending the poem into its eventual fourteen-book structure. This “long poem upon the formation of my own mind” was itself to form a minor foray into Wordsworth's much larger unfinished project, *The Recluse* (Wordsworth, *Letters* 6.680).

Wordsworth's comments on terminating the thirteen-book *Prelude* reveal the motivation for this compositional model of continual change. Wordsworth equates completion with the loss of individual volition:

I finished my Poem about a fortnight ago, I had looked forward to the day as a most happy one ... but it was not a happy day for me I was dejected on many accounts; when I looked back upon the performance it seemed to have a dead weight about it, the reality so far short of the expectation. (*Letters* 1.594)

As in the “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface,” here too the phrase “dead weight” refers to a state of closure that obviates individual agency. If a reader who unquestioningly adopts a ready-made system is “carried like a dead weight” by the author, Wordsworth suggests that his own arrival at a conclusive version of his poem renders him a passive nonentity (“Essay” 82). Formal closure eliminates agency and the freedom to exercise one's own will. The ensuing dejection and sense that the reality has failed to match the expectation is a source of frustration, but also of solace. Wordsworth's notion of his poem as a disappointing performance solicits new versions, as his subsequent thirty years of revision of *The Prelude* must inevitably suggest.¹¹

¹¹ In his biography of Wordsworth, Gill notes that his habitual revision was always accompanied by “illness, fatigue, and sleepless nights” (*Life* 192). Wordsworth links confrontation with the finality of form

Many critics have noted Wordsworth's poetics of indeterminacy. Susan Wolfson refers to *The Prelude*'s pervasive sense of incompleteness as "the power of Wordsworth's questioning voice [which] resists his design of affirmation For Wordsworth, a question is motivated by the desire for an answer, but it also releases energies that thwart the completion of meanings" (*Presence* 370). In a similar vein, Eugene Stelzig characterizes the self of Wordsworth's poetry as perpetually evolving toward an undisclosed goal (*Consciousness* 13). Stelzig suggests that Wordsworth is less concerned with aspiring to the transcendent – as so many of his critics suggest – than with opening up an endless horizon for individual growth and new versions of his poem. He disrupts meaning to facilitate development and to preserve the individuality of the reader and author, who otherwise risk becoming dead weights. In his preface to *The Excursion*, Wordsworth describes his various works as the "cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses" of a gothic church (*Excursion* p. 2). William H. Galperin observes that gothic churches were associated with ruin at the turn of the nineteenth century. Therefore, "Wordsworth's 'gothic' projects an art whose comprehension of the world is conditioned upon a willingness to defer wholeness" (*Revision* 210). This "willingness to defer wholeness," suggested by the metaphor of a semi-complete structure, leaves room for the individual will of the reader to intervene and determine meaning. Wordsworth regards open-ended rhetorical structures as a source of empowerment. If, as Wolfson suggests, readers of *The Prelude* are called upon to fill in the blank on the poem's original empty title-page (*Formal* 131-32), language can indeed function as "the great instrument and common tie

to notions of death and disease, which he counteracts with a poetics of indeterminacy and with revision. Wolfson also sees Wordsworth's reworkings of *The Prelude* as an attempt to overcome a preoccupation with the thematics of death (*Formal* 111).

of society” (Locke *Essay* 225). *The Prelude* disperses authority among its diverse readers, expressing the individualistic values of recent political theory.

Wordsworth’s model of incessant change has transcended *The Prelude*’s forty years of revision. More than a century and a half after the conclusion of its final definitive version, critics are still unsure which text to read. The majority of scholars maintain a great decade model of a vintage Wordsworth whose habitual revision violates the completion of his earlier work. Critics define this young, valorized poet antithetically vis-à-vis his older alter-ego, who represents Wordsworth’s “own earliest and dumbest critic, unsure of the ardor, belief, and assertion of his younger self” (Onorato 16).¹² In “Waiting for the Palfreys: The Great *Prelude* Debate,” old and young poet are pitted against each other in a debate structured as a trial, with cases weighed against the later version of the poem. Defending the 1805 *Prelude* against Wordsworth’s request that the 1850 text be read exclusively, Lindenberger posits that “a man’s last will and testament we honor, even if he gives his money to a prostitute instead of his wife. I don’t think we have the same obligation to a poet” (Baker 28). The polarization of right and unlawful versions suggested by this analogy and by the binary legal register of Jeffrey Baker’s debate has been challenged by more intertextual approaches, which posit the relevance of Wordsworth’s entire career to his poetry. Robert Young argues that the multiple *Preludes*

¹² A similar view is offered by many others, most notably Chandler (*Nature* 31), Wolfson (*Formal* 101), Jonathan Wordsworth (38) and the editors of *The Cornell Wordsworth*. According to Stephen Parrish, its general editor, the series aims “to bring the early Wordsworth into view. Wordsworth’s ... lifelong habit of revision ... [has] obscured the original, often the best, versions of his work” (*Prelude* v).

An interesting exception to this orthodox view is argued by Liu. In spite of Liu’s assessment that the younger Wordsworth’s poetry is founded on the denial of history, he acknowledges “the possibility that Wordsworth was his own critic” in his later work (456). In *The Excursion*, Wordsworth opposes his early ideology of imagination with communitarian “ideologies of *disimagination*, celebrating ... national, ecclesiastical, and public authority. Not ‘I’ but ‘We (nation, church, people)[’].... The voice of the older poet is a voice blurred by multitudes” (491). Liu thus reverses Onorato’s evaluation that Wordsworth was his “own earliest and dumbest critic,” viewing the older Wordsworth as an astute commentator on his younger self.

should be read intertextually (87). Galperin proposes that Wordsworth has been falsely bifurcated into a Romantic and a Victorian poet to fit later fashions of literary periodization, which violate the internal coherence of his project (“Anti-Romanticism” 371).¹³ Nicholas Roe also points to the continuity of Wordsworth’s concern with the French Revolution across *The Prelude*’s half-century of composition (“Revising” 86). Sally Bushell adopts a sophisticated, process-oriented approach to Wordsworth’s compositional method which draws simultaneously on multiple versions of his works (13).

My long reading of the 1805 and 1850 versions of *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* reflects Wordsworth’s ongoing involvement with the thematics of individualism and their relationship to poetic form throughout the course of this project. Despite significant differences of perspective among these texts, they nonetheless form a triptych through which Wordsworth’s development from individualism to communitarianism and from endorsement to rejection of the social contract emerges clearly. Although Wordsworth’s perspective differs among the versions of *The Prelude*, he makes sparse narrative changes and generally purports to maintain the viewpoint of events as they unfolded at the time. He aims to represent “[t]wo consciousnesses, conscious of myself / And of some other Being,” his earlier self (*Prelude* 2.32-33). Thus, his final address to Coleridge wishing that he “wilt be soon / Restored to us in renovated health” is made in both versions from the perspective of 1804 when Wordsworth hoped that Coleridge would recover his health in Malta, rather than of 1810, when Wordsworth and Coleridge were no longer on

¹³ Galperin also problematically erases some of the significant differences between Wordsworth’s early and later phases to establish this unified view of his career (*Revision* 1). He argues that Wordsworth’s Revolutionary phase has been critically overrated and finds no significant differences between his younger and older poetry.

speaking terms, or of 1834 when Coleridge was no longer alive (13.423-24). Similarly, Annabel Patterson comments on Wordsworth's faithfulness to his Revolutionary perspective in Books Six and Nine of both versions of *The Prelude*, in spite of his later disappointment (246). Over many decades of composition Wordsworth does little to censor his political involvements.¹⁴

Jonathan Arac reads the 1850 *Prelude* as Wordsworth's most inclusive work, as Wordsworth incorporates a more universal perspective originally reserved for projected sections of *The Recluse*, which he now knew would never be completed (32). Therefore, counter to current trends in Wordsworth studies privileging the 1805 *Prelude*, Arac ascribes the 1850 text the unique status of being Wordsworth's most comprehensive attempt to offer an all-inclusive philosophy.¹⁵ In the 1850 *Prelude*, Wordsworth integrates a more communitarian approach, suggested by the addition of a passage describing the destruction of the Grande Chartreuse (1850 6.421-89). Wordsworth portrays the convent as a valuable social body assaulted by Revolutionary theories. He similarly assimilates communitarianism and anti-Revolutionary politics in *The Excursion*. The Solitary speaks of marrying "society ... my glittering bride" and of embracing

¹⁴ Wordsworth's openness about his radicalism may be largely due to his decision only to publish *The Prelude* posthumously. As Gill comments, Wordsworth's Victorian readers were not scandalized by his political confessions, which by the 1850s seemed largely irrelevant (*Victorians* 30). Gill's observation is supported by William Minto's 1889 assertion that *The Prelude*'s publication "passed almost unobserved. Nothing could show more strikingly how narrow and confined is the interest taken in Wordsworth's personality. How different it would have been if two publishers had been racing for the first issue of that autobiography of Byron's" (435). *The Prelude* also had a very small readership until 1892, as copyright limited its circulation (Gill, *Victorians* 2). Public attention was thereby deflected away from the political aspect of Wordsworth's poetry until the turn of the twentieth century. In contrast to his candor about his political involvements, Wordsworth carefully suppresses any direct mention of his affair with Annette Vallon and the birth of their daughter Caroline, both potentially highly controversial to a Victorian readership. As late as 1882, William Knight protected Wordsworth's reputation by carefully omitting this information from his posthumous biography (Gill, *Victorians* 231).

¹⁵ By contrast, Kenneth R. Johnston argues that the 1850 *Prelude* is irrelevant to reading *The Recluse*, because Wordsworth knew by the time of the 1850 *Prelude*'s composition that *The Recluse* would never be finished (101). However, Johnston's argument need not preclude Arac's suggestion that Wordsworth integrated hitherto unwritten elements of *The Recluse* into the 1850 *Prelude*.

institutions (*Excursion* 3.734, 738). But this yoking together of Christianity and community does not provide any greater sense of security in the face of the political crises recounted in Wordsworth's texts. Although the 1850 *Prelude* and *The Excursion* broaden the social categories set forth in 1805, this comes at the expense of Wordsworth's notion of the individual.

The negative impact of Wordsworth's later communitarianism on his earlier individualist poetics emerges from a comparison of many key passages among the 1805 and 1850 *Preludes*. Wordsworth's new communitarianism eclipses the individual agency which he explores in the 1805 version. Thus, discussing his post-Revolutionary despair in 1805, Wordsworth remarks: "So that disastrous period did not want / Such sprinklings of all human excellence / As were a joy to hear of" (*Prelude* 10. 442-44). In 1850, the comfort of "human excellence" becomes subordinate to an external source of divine authority:

So *that* disastrous period did not want
Bright sprinklings of all human excellence
To which the silver wands of saints in heaven
Might point with rapturous joy. (1850 10.483-86)

Human interlocutors – "a joy to hear of" – become the "silver wands of saints in heaven." The "voice of Victorian Anglicanism" that Jonathan Wordsworth contrasts negatively to that of the fin-de-siecle radical is unmistakable in these changes ("Revision" 38). But religion was always a feature of Wordsworth's poetry since its inception. Gill astutely questions ascribing Wordsworth's aesthetic decline to religious sentiment, asking: "[a]re conservative views, or reverence for the Church of England, inimical to poetry? Yeats and T. S. Eliot answer that" (*Life* 319). Instead, Gill suggests that Wordsworth's later style is diminished by a tendency toward generalizations (320). Rather than reconciling

notions of individuality and society, Wordsworth opts for a model whereby the individual is demoted in favor of society. Wordsworth's self-professed preference for the final version of *The Prelude* qualifies his earlier model of processing and readerly judgment. Wordsworth de-legitimizes possible multi-versioned readings of *The Prelude* by prescribing "[to follow] strictly the last copy of the text of an Author" (*Letters* 5.236). This foreclosure of values of self-determination and authority so central to the 1805 *Prelude* is detrimental to the 1850 version and to *The Excursion*, undermining the formal and thematic premises of Wordsworth's poetic authority.

The Prelude and Rousseauvian Pastoral

“[U]nto me the events / Seem'd nothing out of nature's certain course –[.]”
(*Prelude* 9.252-53)

Wordsworth structures *The Prelude* through a dialogue with social contract theory's novel assertion of the individual as the primary social unit. He echoes Rousseau's narrative of a state of nature, traces his account of the individual, recounts the genesis of a Rousseauvian general will and points to some central problems with these notions. Wordsworth portrays his childhood as having taken place in a state of nature. Nature performs a socializing function, preparing him as an individual who can then become a member of society. The first opportunity to exercise the values learned from nature comes when Wordsworth moves to London. But the chaotic and heavily populated city confounds his organized, individualistic social vision. When Wordsworth visits France in the early stages of the revolution, his horrific experience of London is initially transformed. But even at the height of his revolutionary euphoria, Wordsworth recognizes a strain in the revolutionary notion of government. The individual citizens fail to conform

to the one collective body of Rousseau's social theory. This difficulty soon has urgent and practical ramifications as the social body starts to disintegrate into conflicting factions all vying for power. With the onset of the Reign of Terror, Wordsworth comes to realize that a society premised on the individual is fundamentally at odds with notions of community. His return to England from Revolutionary France marks the beginning of a lengthy crisis and revaluation of his earlier principles. Initially, Wordsworth strives to rescue individuality from the defunct system of the social contract. He privileges memory – expressed in his famous meditation on “spots of time” – and poetry, voiced in the *The Prelude*'s concluding vision of self-mastery via aesthetic vocation. Yet while the value of individual imagination is the crowning statement of the 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth carefully qualifies the extent of his individualism by contrasting it to Godwin's more radical dismissal of social institutions and Adam Smith's politically divergent but no less radical individualism. These negative comparisons to Godwin and Smith suggest Wordsworth's discomfort with individualism. In the 1850 *Prelude*, he tones down some of his more defiant assertions of individualism to integrate a more communitarian approach. In *The Excursion*, this communitarianism is taken one step further as Wordsworth completely subordinates the individual to society. Thus, individual and society are never actually reconciled in a project specifically designed to resolve “views of Man, Nature, and Society” (*Excursion* p. 2).

Wordsworth begins *The Prelude* by repeating Rousseau's pastoral pattern whereby social retreat motivates the idealization of nature. His opening homecoming from London to the Lake District invokes Rousseau's account of natural man in the *Second Discourse*, who “know[s] only those things the possession of which is in his power or easily

acquired, nothing should be so tranquil as his soul" (*Inequality* 86 N.9). Natural man "satisf[ies] his hunger under an oak, quench[es] his thirst at the first stream, find[s] his bed at the foot of the same tree that furnished his meal" (20). Similarly, Wordsworth "drink[s] wild water, and ... pluck[s] green herbs, / And gather[s] fruits fresh from their native bough" (*Prelude* 1.37-38). He is

[c]hear'd by the genial pillow of the earth
Beneath [his] head, sooth'd by a sense of touch
From the warm ground, that balanced [him.] (*Prelude* 1.89-91)

Yet whereas Rousseau constructs an agonistic relationship between nature and society, Wordsworth initially presumes a complementary dynamic. His account of childhood in *The Prelude* is modeled after the state of nature. Although Wordsworth grows up in an isolated rural community, he experiences nature as a sociable force. He alludes to nature as the "great social principle of life," describing it in images drawn from social and urban environments (*Prelude* 2.408). Nature structures Wordsworth's mind as an "interminable building rear'd / By observation of affinities / In objects where no brotherhood exists" (2.401-04). Thus, counter to Liu's suggestion that Wordsworth's nature is merely a ruse "to carve the self out of history," it actually proves to be a fundamentally social concept with strong affinities to political theory (4-5). Wordsworth posits an easy transition "[t]hrough nature to the love of human Kind," anthropomorphizing nature and ascribing it an ethical, social consciousness (*Prelude* 8.588). Nature castigates Wordsworth when he goes poaching; when he steals a boat, it appears to reprimand him. Nature disciplines Wordsworth and installs a social structure in his otherwise pre-social and inchoate mind, which comes to be framed by

a dark
Invisible workmanship that reconciles

Discordant elements, and makes them move
In one society. (*Prelude* 1.353-56)

(132-5)

This social infrastructure is the necessary prerequisite for his later interest in external social institutions. Wordsworth eventually discovers

My thoughts ... attracted more and more
By slow gradations towards human Kind,
And to the good and ill of human life:
Nature had led me on, and now I seem'd
To travel independent of her help[.] (*Prelude* 8.760-64)

Wordsworth presents the nature of his youth as a preliminary stage in becoming sociable.

Yet Wordsworth's first encounter with an actual large-scale society in London explodes this idealized concept of nature and reveals its underlying conflicts. On arriving in London, Wordsworth is initially eager "[to pitch] my vagrant tent, / ...at large, among / The unfenced regions of society" (*Prelude* 7.60-62). He expects society to be an extension of the socializing nature of his childhood, a site for him to "pitch [his] vagrant tent" and domesticate "unfenced regions." Counter to this expectation, the unfenced quality of London which violates individual autonomy eclipses Wordsworth's earlier sense of himself as framed by one society (1.352, 356).¹⁶ Because London confounds Wordsworth's social vision, he envisions it as the antithesis of society, as a violent and threatening urban jungle. If nature constitutes the "great social principle of life," his sense of himself away from nature becomes that of a vagrant (2.408). Wordsworth eventually decamps from London to the Lake District, having failed to find an outer correlative for

¹⁶ In addition to narratives of the state of nature, this passage also invokes nostalgia for the landscape prior to the industrial revolution, as suggested in the practice of frame-breaking in opposition to the manufacturing of mechanical looms.

the social vision that nature fostered in his mind during childhood. He remarks on the painful absence of social cohesion in London:

O blank confusion! and a type not false
Of what the mighty City is itself
To all except a Straggler here and there,
To the whole swarm of its inhabitants;
An undistinguishable world to men,
The slaves unrespited of low pursuits,
Living amid the same perpetual flow
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences
That have no law, no meaning, no end (7.696-705)

As “no law” guarantees the discreteness and dignity of the individual, all are “melted and reduced / to one identity,” eliding the cherished autonomy of Wordsworth’s childhood. In the 1850 *Prelude*, Wordsworth refers to London as “thou monstrous ant-hill on the plain / Of a too busy world! Before me flow, / Thou endless stream of men and moving things!” (1850 7.149-51). The monstrosity of this ant-hill results from the “endless stream of men and moving things” which violates individual dignity. In this flow, humans are seen as ants or even things, losing their autonomy and identity.

Wordsworth’s account of London is influenced by the malevolent cityscapes of *The Confessions* and *Julie*. Marcel Hénaff comments on Rousseau’s comparison of city dwellers “to ants (an economic model of large masses abandoned to servile tasks)” (18). This metaphor suggests that “*when men are too close, they devour each other*,” losing their discrete identities (23). It is only on his subsequent visit to Revolutionary France that having “one identity” and being part of a swarm acquire value for Wordsworth. Wordsworth presents early revolutionary France as a direct inversion of London’s Rousseauvian dystopia. He transforms London’s negative “swarm of ... inhabitants”

from an image of chaos to one of pleasurable commotion. Wordsworth thereby describes “a merry crowd” of citizens celebrating the anniversary of the Revolution as “swarm[ing], gaudy and gay as bees” (*Prelude* 6.393, 398). Albeit clearly positive in this context, this image still bears traces of its negative predecessor. Although the swarm now inspires revelry rather than horror, suggested by the switch from monstrous ants to festive bees, Morton D. Paley comments on the pervasively threatening connotation of swarms for Wordsworth, which invoke the swarming army of fallen angels in *Paradise Lost* (174). Similarly, in Wordsworth’s account of London, gaudiness is vulgar, but in France it becomes gay rather than degrading. Having “one identity” similarly comes to connote cohesion instead of the loss of autonomy. Much as Clarens compensates for the shortcomings of Paris in *Julie*, Revolutionary France redeems the ills of London. Wordsworth accomplishes this through the image of the “*fête*,” the communal gathering which rectifies the mayhem of urban society (Hénaff 23). Subsequent to this transformation, he wonders at “[h]ow bright a face is worn when joy of one / Is joy of tens of millions” (*Prelude* 6.359-60). The “joy of tens of millions” celebrating the anniversary of the revolution is the positive counterpart of the “endless stream of moving things” witnessed in London. Where Wordsworth had previously been appalled by the absence of a collective principle that could safeguard the identity of individuals in society, he is now enraptured by its discovery in revolutionary theory and by its recuperative effect on his former alienating experience of London. The “joy of tens of millions” now complements “the joy of one,” inspiring awe in its capacity to maintain the discrete identities of its constituents.

For Wordsworth, revolutionary France is the perfect venue for effecting a seemingly harmonious transition from the state of nature to a condition of natural society. Wordsworth explains that at any time nature's "mighty forms" would have been sufficient cause to visit France (*Prelude* 6.351). The revolution combines these natural resources with individual and political rejuvenation: "'twas a time when Europe was rejoiced, / France standing on the top of golden hours. / And human nature seeming born again" (6.352-54). Wordsworth's imagination becomes captivated by the notion of Revolutionary society as a logical extension of nature, founded on the same communal and ethical values that nature had installed in his mind in childhood. At this initial stage, English liberals embraced the French Revolution as the inevitable counterpart of British Parliamentary reform, part of a trajectory of progress that would soon terminate arbitrary power.¹⁷ The reinvention of society through the Revolution is subsequently conflated with the rebirth of nature, so that Wordsworth finds "benevolence and blessedness / Spread like a fragrance every where, like Spring / That leaves no corner of the Land untouch'd" (6.368-70). Not only are nature and society reborn, but also Wordsworth's

¹⁷ In his *The Life of Napoleon Buonaparte* (1830), William Hazlitt describes the optimism and national pride that the French Revolution inspired in the English prior to 1793, as they saw France following in their footsteps:

The Revolution of 1688 gave the death's wound to the doctrine of hereditary right This example, set by the English people and confirmed by English philosophers, was the glass in which France (if she knew her own dignity and interest) was to dress herself. There was an honest simplicity and severity in our style of our civil architecture ... that acted as a foil to the Gothic redundancy and disproportioned frippery of our continental neighbors. (1:99)

Stripped of this artificial "frillery," France enters a joyous state of nature very similar to that described by Wordsworth in his account of his initial visit of 1790:

The difference [was] not between the old and new philosophy, but between the natural dictates of the heart and the artificial and oppressive distinctions of society From Nature's bastards, they had become her sons, children of one common parent; in all their towns and villages you were met with songs of triumph, with the festive dance and garlands of flowers, as in a time of jubilee and rejoicing. (191)

sense of himself. Recalling this honeymoon phase, he exclaims: “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven” (10.692-93). Natural, social and individual rejuvenation – dawn, Revolution and youth – seamlessly coincide.

Wordsworth subsequently resolves to make social life “[a]s just in regulation, and as pure / As individual,” extending what had previously been an interest in his own individual growth into a concern for society as a whole (9.368, 9.370-71).

General Wills, Individual Ills

I took the knife in hand,
And, stopping not at parts less sensitive,
Endeavoured with my best of skill to probe
The living body of society
Even to the heart[.] (*Prelude* 10.872-76)

Wordsworth's friend and mentor Michel Beaupuy introduced him to Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality and Social Contract* when Wordsworth visited France in 1792 (Wu 119). *The Prelude* recounts their pivotal discussions on the extension of private happiness to social rejuvenation. They consider

[H]ow, together lock'd
By new opinions, scatter'd tribes have made
One body spreading wide as clouds in heaven.
To aspirations then of our own souls
Did we appeal; and finally beheld
A living confirmation of the whole
Before us in a People from the depths
Of shameful imbecility upris'n
Fresh, as the morning star[.] (*Prelude* 9.392-400)

The sense of unification afforded by the revolution resonates with the movement from private, individual wills to one general will envisioned in the *Social Contract*.

Wordsworth reenacts Rousseau's vision that "[e]ach of us puts all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole" (*Contract* 139). Chandler argues that this passage invokes a chivalric, tribal past derived from Burke's concept of tradition (Chandler 205-06). But Wordsworth suggests that tribes are an intermediate grouping of private individuals, which extends their singular rights into a broader "confirmation of the whole."

Wordsworth's familiarity with the general will is apparent in his "Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff," where he deems it "madness to expect a manifestation of the *general* will, at the same time that we allow to a *particular* will that weight" ("Llandaff" 41). In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth employs Rousseau's terminology to critique monarchy for disempowering citizens, registering "[h]atred of absolute rule, where will of One / Is law for all" (*Prelude* 9.514-15). After seeing a "hunger-bitten Girl," the victim of despotism, Wordsworth blames "sensual state and cruel power / Whether by the edict of the one or few" (9.512, 9.529-30). As in the "Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff," here too Wordsworth suggests that "the edict of the one or the few" is harmful to the greater good. He hopes to "see the People having a strong hand / In framing their own Laws" and establishing a Rousseauvian social contract (9.543-44). Following Rousseau's notion of liberation as a state of mind, Wordsworth suggests that private individuals are redeemed "from the depths / Of shameful imbecility" (9.398-99). In the "Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff," he quotes Rousseau's *Social Contract* verbatim: "Every man born in slavery is born for slavery; nothing could be more certain. Slaves lose everything in their chains, even the desire to be rid of them. They love their servitude as the companions of Ulysses

loved their brutishness” (*Contract* 133).¹⁸ Wordsworth admires Rousseau's attempt to reclaim people from the brutishness of slavery through education.

But education does not liberate Wordsworth. He admits to having had a limited knowledge of political theory and to having been

untaught by thinking or by books
To reason well of polity or law
And nice distinctions, then on every tongue,
Of natural rights and civil[.] (*Prelude* 9.208-11)

This naivety provides him with

a sounder judgment
Than afterwards, [I] carried around with me yet
With less alloy to its integrity
The experience of past ages[.] (*Prelude* 9.346-49)

Wordsworth suggests that he adopts corrupting social theories “[o]f natural rights and civil” without really understanding them (*Prelude* 9.204). Although he had “skimm’d and sometimes read / With eagerness the Pamphlets of the day,” he lacks a more thorough command of recent events in France (9.105-6):

[H]aving never chanced
To see a regular Chronicle which might shew,
If any such indeed existed then,
Whence the main organs of the public Power
Had sprung, their transmigrations when and how
Accomplish’d, giving thus unto events
A form and body, all things were to me
Loose and disjointed[.] (*Prelude* 9.108-15)

Wordsworth's vague grasp of historical events leads him to seek the cohesion provided by “a regular Chronicle.” As Alan Liu observes, he hopes “to see history not as a loose

¹⁸ See “Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff,” in which Wordsworth quotes Rousseau verbatim in the original French (36).

variety of beauty and sublimity, but as an organic whole" (372). Wordsworth turns to Rousseau's writings, which promise to transform private individuals into a coherent social body.

As Revolutionary France abruptly becomes violent, Wordsworth grows increasingly aware of its proximity to a chaotic, anarchic state of nature, to which it can suddenly relapse without warning. Following the September massacres, he begins to perceive revolutionary society degenerating into a pre-civilized Hobbesian state of nature. Wordsworth spends the night near the Place de Carrousel – a name that implies the fickle, carrousel-like changeability of revolutionary society, which has turned from peaceableness to violence overnight. At this site where a month previously Republicans had massacred royalists, Wordsworth observes that Paris “at the best ... seemed a place of fear, / Unfit for the repose of night, / Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam” (*Prelude* 10.79-81). He imagines the members of this new society as predatory tigers rather than cohesive bees (6.403). The unity of the “scatter’d tribes” forming one body breaks down (9.393). Wordsworth reflects on this collapse:

To Nature then
Power had reverted; habit, custom, law
Had left an interregnum’s open space
For her to move about in, uncontrol’d. (*Prelude* 10.632-35)

Wordsworth criticizes revolutionary social institutions for failing to establish cohesion. Whereas he had previously echoed Rousseau's disdain for “the regal Sceptre, and the pomp / Of Orders and Degrees,” he now determines that the “interregnum” has left a moral void (*Prelude* 9.219-20). Wordsworth parts ways with the social contract, which he now associates with violence and coerciveness. He explains:

I took the knife in hand,

And, stopping not at parts less sensitive,
Endeavoured with my best of skill to probe
The living body of society
Even to the heart[.] (*Prelude* 10.872-76)

Wordsworth ruthlessly dissects the social body, seeking to penetrate its core and devise an alternative to the social contract. He turns to monarchy as a last means of safeguarding individual rights in an otherwise corrupt and violent social body, a lesser evil than outright despotism.

The revolutionary government's reliance on force to maintain its control becomes apparent with Napoleon's hypocritical coronation:

[A] Pope
Is summon'd in, to crown an Emperor;
This last opprobrium when we see the dog
Returning to his vomit, when the sun
That rose in splendour, was alive, and moved
In exultation among living clouds
Hath put his function and his glory off,
And (turn'd into a gewgaw, a machine)
Sets like an opera phantom. (*Prelude* 10.969-77)

Napoleon's return to the previously rejected despotic model generates a complex reflection on the relations between nature and society that gave rise to the revolution. The "dog / Returning to his vomit" suggests a natural depravity which is the opposite of the sun that "moved / In exultation among living clouds," implying a dark side of nature that the revolution unveils. The "sun / That rose in splendour," the sense of organically intertwined natural and social rejuvenation effected by the revolution, is inverted into a *deus-ex-machina*: "a gewgaw, a machine ... / ... an opera phantom." Deborah Jenson comments on the theatricality of Revolutionary violence, which involved dramatically staged executions and carnage (14). Utopian revolutionary nature emerges as a cheap theatrical imitation. Wordsworth's initial vision of a society born from nature, which

combines private individuals into a collective social body, collapses into its antithesis, into artifice and violence.

Wordsworth's disgust with the French Revolution temporarily leads him to shun social institutions and to blame ideological forces:

When a taunt
Was taken up by scoffers in their pride,
Saying, "Behold the harvest which we reap
From popular Government and Equality,"
I saw that it was neither these, nor aught
Of wild belief engrafted on their names
By false philosophy, that caused the woe,
But that it was a reservoir of guilt
And ignorance, fill'd up from age to age,
That could no longer hold its loathsome charge;
And burst, and spread in deluge through the Land. (*Prelude* 10.459-69)

Wordsworth distinguishes himself from anti-Jacobin scoffers, who accuse "popular Government and Equality" of being a false philosophy. He criticizes the conservative turn in England, asserting that "[o]ur Shepherds (this say merely) at that time / Thirsted to make the guardian Crook of Law / A tool of murder," referring to the famous treason trials of 1794 in which radicals faced death on charges of sedition (*Prelude* 10.665-69). Instead, he ascribes the failure of the French Revolution to a tradition of "false philosophy" which motivates the "wild belief" in revolutionary France. This current failure reflects a broader theoretical difficulty extending private individuals into a larger social entity:

What there is best in individual man,
Of wise in passion and sublime in power,
What there is strong and pure in household love,
Benevolent in small societies,
And great in large ones also...
..... these momentous objects
Had exercised my mind, yet had they not

Though deeply felt been thoroughly understood
By Reason; nay far from it[.] (*Prelude* 10.685-92)

Wordsworth's respective portrayals of his childhood and of his sojourns in London and revolutionary France describe a movement from an innately sociable state of nature to a society founded on the rights of the private individual. This change is indeed "deeply felt," but not "thoroughly understood / By Reason." Wordsworth is disappointed by Rousseau's reliance on coercion, and has yet to find a form of society that can unite private individuals into a coherent whole while retaining their freedom.

Repeatedly in his discussion of the revolution, Wordsworth emphasizes the desire to ground happiness in a universal reality: "Not favor'd spots alone, but the whole earth / The beauty wore of promise" (*Prelude* 10.719-20). This ideal is to be fulfilled in the here and now:

Not in Utopia, subterraneous fields,
Or some secreted Island Heaven knows where;
But in the very world which is the world
Of all of us, the place where, in the end
We reap our happiness, or not at all. (*Prelude* 10.741-45)

When this fails, Wordsworth withdraws from broad social vision to the private individual, the sole positive fragment that he is able to extract from Rousseau's theory:

[A]s the desert hath green spots, the sea
Small islands planted amid stormy waves,
So that disastrous period did not want
Bright sprinklings of all human excellence[.] (*Prelude* 10.470-73)

Sabin's observations on Rousseau's image of the island suggest his major influence on Wordsworth: "Rousseau goes so far as to suggest that the very self must become like an island, circumscribed and separate from the causes of discord outside" (115). Sabin cites

memory as a privileged site in this process of self-isolation (96-97). Wordsworth

famously proffers:

There are in our existence spots of time,
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A renovating Virtue, whence, depress'd
By false opinion and contentious thought
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight
In trivial occupations, and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
Are nourish'd, and invisibly repair'd[.] (*Prelude* 11.243-50)

Chandler suggests that these spots of time represent a move away from broad social vision, "ground[ing] the conservative social and political position of *The Prelude*" (223).

M. H. Abrams argues that they provide Wordsworth with a sense of control in the aftermath of his revolutionary crisis (*Natural* 370). Wordsworth thus acquires the "deepest feeling that the mind / Is lord and master, and that outward sense / Is but the obedient servant of her will" (*Prelude* 11.256-58). By privileging private individuality, Wordsworth can now guarantee order and cohesion, at least within his own mind. Sabin also points to an important distinction; whereas Rousseau's concept of memory is deterministic, Wordsworth's is dynamic and thus able to overcome material realities (99, 93).

Accordingly, Wordsworth is now able to impose his vision on the world in new manners:

I seem'd about this period to have sight
Of a new world, a world, too, that was fit
To be transmitted and made visible
To other eyes[.] (*Prelude* 12.380-83)

Through poetry, Wordsworth transmits his private experience "To other[s]." On the summit of Snowdon, he reflects on the supremacy of the individual mind, which has weathered revolution and crisis:

[T]he mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this Frame of things
(Which 'mid all revolutions in the hopes
And fears of men doth still remain unchanged)[.] (*Prelude* 13.452-56)

If social and natural values had previously formed the individual, the mind now both literally and figuratively rises above revolutions and the earth. Wordsworth places "revolutions in the hopes / And fears of men" in parentheses, syntactically subordinating the social to the personal. This privileging of the private individual entails an emphasis on personal experience in the place of social institutions or historical processes.

Cultivating the Communal Garden

"[T]he paradoxical reveries of Rousseau, and the flippancies of Voltaire, are plants which will not naturalize[.]" (Wordsworth, "Cintra" 177)

Examining the 1805 *Prelude* in isolation from the 1850 version, Liu reads its conclusion as Wordsworth's ultimate act of socio-historical denial whereby the imagination "crosses its mountain pass, climbs its cloud-veiled peak, to enter a new land where collective loss can be imagined the gain of the individual" (455). But, in fact, *The Prelude* does not end here. Liu identifies Wordsworth's later poetry as offering a communitarian critique of his earlier individualism (456), yet he does not consider the 1850 version as a potential source for this critique. *The Prelude*'s long history of revision constitutes a process of intense self-analysis and self-criticism, apparent already in its 1805 version. Wordsworth encounters similar difficulties to Rousseau's alienated modern

subjects, who experience society as hostile to individual desires. Yet where Rousseau labors to reinscribe notions of commonality and duty, even if he must subordinate the individual will, Wordsworth goes one step further than Rousseau in departing from this coercive social and literary model. He separates from a society that hinders his autonomy, and discovers his poetic vocation. Wordsworth does not regard literature as a means for political ends, but rather as a site for political engagement.

These developments are apparent already in the 1805 *Prelude*, where Wordsworth reasserts the importance of social institutions by contrasting his own stance with other more individualistic discourses. After rejecting Rousseau, he moves on to criticize the social theories of Godwin and Smith, otherwise dissimilar thinkers whom he similarly charges with excessive individualism. This negative comparison suggests Wordsworth's assertion of the ongoing importance of community to his poetic vision. Of these two exemplars of excessive individualism, Wordsworth's discussion of Godwin is by far the more extensive. Unlike his Revolutionary involvement, which he describes faithfully in spite of his later disillusionment, Wordsworth's discussion of Godwinism is tinged with criticism throughout. While able to acknowledge the merits of the French Revolution, despite its subsequent failure, Wordsworth views Godwinism as inherently unsound and is unable to provide a diachronic account of its initial attraction, to the extent that Godwin, albeit clearly present, is never directly named in any of the versions of *The Prelude*.

Roe ascribes Wordsworth's aversion to Godwin to a confusion between Godwin and Robespierre, whereby Revolutionary violence is displaced onto Godwinian philosophy ("Imagining" 176). He also notes Wordsworth's silence regarding his

personal friendship with Godwin, who was “the immediate ancestor of Coleridge as Wordsworth’s philosophical mentor and guide” (*Wordsworth* 7). According to Roe, the grounds for Wordsworth’s disenchantment with Godwinism were primarily personal, arising from Godwin’s disappointing lack of charisma when the two finally met after a lengthy correspondence (197). In addition to this personal history, Wordsworth’s disapproval of Godwin also clearly has theoretical grounds. Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* has no concept of group persons and posits the freedom of the individual at the center of society. Yet while calling for the abolition of social institutions and for individual empowerment, Godwin also undermines individual agency altogether by claiming all human action as predetermined and beyond the individual’s control. Peter Howell sums up this impasse of Godwinian individualism: “To be an individual in the Godwinian sense ... is to empty oneself of individuality” (78). Wordsworth recognizes the paradox of “[b]uild[ing] social freedom on its only basis, / The freedom of the individual mind” (*Prelude* 10.824-25). He critiques the notion that the mind can “with a resolute mastery [shake] off / The accidents of nature, time, and place,” deeming it a “dream / ... flattering to the young ingenuous mind, / Pleas’d with extremes” (10.821-22, 10.814-16). Instead, he suggests that “social freedom” must depend on factors which exceed the individual. In temporarily following Godwin, Wordsworth acknowledges having

sacrificed
The exactness of a comprehensive mind
To scrupulous and microscopic views
That furnish’d out materials for a work
Of false imagination[.] (*Prelude* 10.843-47)

Godwin's microscopic focus on the individual comes at the expense of a more comprehensive understanding of society.

On similar grounds of excessive individualism, an inability to theorize the community, and an abstraction of human nature from its vital informing contexts, Wordsworth also rejects Adam Smith's social thought. Smith posits a minimal basis for sociability, asserting that people "feel so little for another, with whom they have no particular connexion, in comparison of what they feel for themselves" (*Theory* 101). A regard for individuals does not entail a regard for the multitude. Smith defines justice as "but a negative virtue We may often fulfill the rules of justice by sitting still and doing nothing" (95-96). He suggests that the pursuit of self interest "without intending it, without knowing it, advances the interest of the society" (215). Individual private actions inevitably benefit a common good. Wordsworth complains of "[t]he utter hollowness of what is named / The wealth of Nations" (*Prelude* 12.77-78). His 1850 *Prelude* also attacks "theories / Vague and unsound" and "the Books / Of modern Statists," namely Smith, for doing injustice to "[l]ife, human life, with all its sacred claims / Of sex and age, and heaven-descended rights" (1850 13.69-70, 13.71-72, 13.73-74). Wordsworth criticizes the exclusion of meaningful social identities of gender, age and locality which reconcile private individuals to society (*Prelude* 10.88). Instead of an abstract concept of human nature, he strives to reintegrate "[a] more judicious knowledge of the worth / And dignity of individual man" into the "laws, and fashion of the State" (13.80-81, 13.104). Wordsworth suggests that Smith's model is founded on the elision of these private identities.

In his “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)” (1815), Wordsworth critiques a prevalent view of literature as having “no fixed principles in human nature ... to rest upon” (“Essay” 71). Wordsworth ascribes this misapprehension of literature as overtly idiosyncratic to Smith, who Wordsworth also considers “the worst critic, David Hume not excepted, that Scotland, a soil to which this sort of weed seems natural, has produced” (N. 71). Hume and Smith base their respective social theories on the notion of self-interest. Hume argues that “*self-interest is the original motive of the establishment of justice,*” and therefore also of society (*Treatise* 499). Smith similarly views self-interest as the main principle of socialization (*Theory* 23). By using a derogatory natural metaphor to critique Hume and Smith, Wordsworth suggests that their individualistic accounts of nature are pre-civilized in the Hobbesian sense, devoid of a principle of social cohesion. Their respective defenses of self-interest are repugnant to Wordsworth’s collectivist sensibilities, representing what he perceives to be a violent and lawless social vision. In his *Tract on the Convention of Cintra* (1809), Wordsworth returns to the metaphor of bad weeds, this time to critique the Rousseauvian philosophical tradition rather than Hume and Smith. His indictment of these two otherwise distinct schools of thought through the same image suggests his view of them as similarly overly individualistic. To justify the English and Spanish as well-matched allies against Napoleon’s army, Wordsworth asserts that “the paradoxical reveries of Rousseau, and the flippancies of Voltaire, are plants which will not naturalize in the country of Calderon and Cervantes” (*Cintra* 177). The French *philosophes* represent a negative form of nature, like the Convention of Cintra itself – a controversially peaceable treaty between England and France – which is described as “a solitary straggler out of the

circumference of nature's law – a monster which could not propagate and had no birthright in futurity" (97). Wordsworth suggests that Rousseauvian paradox – possibly alluding to the characteristically Rousseauvian conflict between society and the individual studied in this dissertation – is a threat to the social order.

This contrast between good, nationalistic, socially-constructive nature and the destructive nature of French philosophy is discussed by Chandler through reference to Burke. Contending that *The Prelude* "is thoroughly Burkean," Chandler cites Burke's view that "[m]an, in his moral nature, becomes, in his progress through life, a creature of habits, of sentiments growing out of them. These form our second nature" (Chandler 32, 71). Second nature is distinguished from a more primal form of nature, which Burke terms "the defects of our naked, shivering nature" (66-67). Chandler argues that Wordsworth privileges second nature, the site where nature is domesticated by culture, and rejects primal nature (74). Although Wordsworth's apostrophe to the "Genius of Burke" in the 1850 *Prelude* clearly expresses admiration for Burke (cf. 1850 7.512-43), his position of post-Revolutionary conservatism is closer to communitarianism than Burkean traditionalism. Wordsworth's critique of Burke in "A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff" demonstrates some enduring differences between the two. Wordsworth argues that:

Mr. Burke roused the indignation of all ranks of men, when by a refinement in cruelty superior to that which in the East yokes the living to the dead he strove to persuade us that we and our posterity to the end of time were riveted to a constitution by the indissoluble compact of a dead parchment, and were bound to cherish a corse at the bosom, when reason might call aloud that it should be entombed. ("Llandaff" 48)¹⁹

¹⁹ The "indissoluble compact of a dead parchment" is a reference to the British constitution, revered by Burke "as an *entailed* inheritance derived from our forefathers" (*Reflections* 29). Burke favorably contrasts the constitution to the social contract account of the state, which he dismisses as "nothing better than a

Wordsworth rejects Burke and associates him with necrophilia and wife-burning: “cruelty ... which in the East yokes the living to the dead.” By implication, Wordsworth seeks a more living, changeable model for society founded less on tradition and more on contemporary concerns.

Walter D. Love’s analysis of the Burkean imaginary is useful in understanding Wordsworth’s account of Burke as stagnant and necrophilic. Love posits that counter to popular opinion:

by and large Burke was not an organicist in his thinking. In fact, if one were to choose a word to characterize his thinking about the body corporate, it would be more appropriate to take a very contrary one and speak of Burke’s “staticism.” Each form of his imagery led him to emphasize endurance, longevity, and even changelessness. He disparaged the biological analogy because it suggested death and destruction. (Love 193)

Burke’s view of society as founded on tradition is contrary to Wordsworth’s quest for a society reborn from nature. His staticism is the antithesis of Wordsworth’s poetics of process as set forth in the passage on Simplon Pass and as enacted over the various versions of *The Prelude*. Love refers to Samuel Johnson’s 1785 definition of “organick” as “consisting of various parts cooperating with each other” (185). This is indeed what Wordsworth and social contract philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau strive to attain in their respective accounts of society. This social dynamism remains the one fixture of *The Prelude*. Even Wordsworth’s portrait of Burke in 1850 is dynamic and organic. Wordsworth “see[s] him, – old, but vigorous in age, – / Stand[ing] like an oak whose stag-horn branches start / Out of its leafy brow” (1850 7.519-21). The oak represents a vision of society as a vigorous living entity, a unified community.

partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other low concern” (84-85).

The Dead Weight of Communitarianism

“[T]he performance seemed to have a dead weight about it, the reality so far short of the expectation.” (*Letters* 1.594)

Rather than reverting to Burkean staticism, the later Wordsworth aims to correct the social contract's weak account of society by developing a new concept of community. In the 1850 *Prelude*, Wordsworth adds an account of the destruction of the Grande Chartreuse. Wordsworth witnesses a Revolutionary army “subvert[ing] / That frame of social being, which so long / Had bodied forth” (1850 7.427-29). Nature, having been on the side of the Revolution, now intervenes on behalf of this valuable social institution: “- ‘Stay, stay your sacrilegious hands!’ – the voice / Was Nature’s” (7.431). This addition represents a broader trend in the 1850 version, whereby Wordsworth asserts the importance of community and qualifies his earlier statements of individualism. Hence, in 1850 Wordsworth omits his claim of 1805 that nature has “frame[d]” him as “[a] favor’d Being” (*Prelude* 1.364-65). Elsewhere, he radically tones-down his self-perception of uniqueness. In 1805 Wordsworth asserts “I do not speak of learning, moral truth, / Or understanding; ‘twas enough for me / To know that I was otherwise endow’d” (3.91-93). In 1850, this knowledge, previously independent “of learning, moral truth, / Or understanding,” becomes deeply indebted to institutions. Wordsworth is now “endowed with holy powers / And faculties” (1850 3.88-89).

The Excursion continues Wordsworth's critique of abstract political theory and his quest for a more significant basis of sociability. It takes up where *The Prelude* leaves off, repeating the narrative of revolution, Godwinism, and despair, but with a difference. This time, Wordsworth's autobiography is recast in far less morally ambiguous terms through

the character of the Solitary, who – as Gill argues – “embodies the dark potentialities of [Wordsworth’s] own life” (*Life* 282). Like the Wordsworth of *The Prelude*, the Solitary is led astray by the French Revolution and by Godwinism, which drives him to the brink of despair;²⁰ unlike the Wordsworth of *The Prelude*, the Solitary learns from the church to subordinate his individuality to social institutions and eventually redresses the balance between the individual and society in favor of the latter. As Laura Dabundo observes, whereas *The Prelude* advocates private introspection, *The Excursion* is “extrospective,” emphasizing the triumph of community over individuality (11).

Because *The Excursion* resolves *The Prelude*’s more open-ended social dilemmas, this renders it at times a somewhat didactic text. The various characters – the speaker, the Wanderer, the Solitary and the pastor –all engage in an ongoing unanimous monologue that Wolfson contrasts unfavorably to the multivocal inner dialogue of *The Prelude* (*Presence* 150). In contrast to Wolfson, Hewitt views Wordsworth’s dispersal of viewpoints among these four characters “as a series of juxtaposed, interrelated, and mutually qualifying perspectives” (183-84). She reads *The Excursion* “as an experiment in adapting narrative form and systematic inquiry to non-authoritative conditions.” Yet counter to Hewitt’s analysis, the characters of *The Excursion* do not provide a genuine multiplicity of viewpoints. They never disagree, and consistently affirm each others’ perspectives. Alan Grob ascribes their relative flatness to Wordsworth’s rejection of individualism: “The ready moral to be drawn from the Wordsworthian decline is that the modern spirit with its trust in the independent and personal judgment cannot be forsaken without just such a price being exacted in spontaneity and joy and power” (274).

²⁰ Bushell relates Wordsworth’s 1812 composition of the Solitary’s narrative describing the deaths of his wife and two children to Wordsworth’s loss of his own two children, Catherine and Thomas, earlier that year (11).

Wordsworth's communitarianism is incompatible with the trajectory of inner growth enacted in *The Prelude*. He has finally obtained the "something evermore about to be" that was the objective of his poetry. Thus, hope no longer resides in individual "[e]ffort and expectation, and desire," but in an objective social order. This subdual of the conflict between the individual and society reduces the dynamism of Wordsworth's poetry, which relies on these interdependent categories.²¹ His writing suffers the "dead weight" ensuing from the loss of individual volition.

Through the character of the Wanderer, Wordsworth clearly rejects individualism and comes to celebrate

Creatures, that in communities exist,
 Less, as might seem, for general guardianship
 Or through dependence upon mutual aid,
 Than by participation of delight
 And a strict love of fellowship, combined. (*Excursion* 4.443-46)

A "strict love of fellowship," identified with the church, is contrasted with individualistic rationales for forming societies – the "general guardianship" and "dependence upon mutual aid" for private benefit advanced in Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Wordsworth

²¹ John Wyatt posits that Wordsworth's mid and later poetry is deeply influenced by a gradualist model of geology emphasizing continuity in place of apocalyptic models of conflict. Wordsworth adopts the continuous view of geological history propounded by Adam Sedgwick and William Whewell, who advocate an "orderly description of landscape ... [and] attention to the continuum of geological history, rather than to the catastrophic breaks or break of the earth's story" (104). This affinity, based on their values of "order, law, and clarity," is most evident in *The Excursion* (106). Through Margaret and the Solitary's stories, Wordsworth dramatizes "the dire consequences of failing to trust in an ordered, benign universe. When Margaret gives up hope, her housekeeping deteriorates. Similarly, the Solitary's cottage is an untidy, disorderly collection of half-forgotten interests and hobbies" (106). I would add that far from being "half-forgotten," however, these hobbies are presented as extremely destructive and inherently subversive of order, as I argue in my subsequent analysis of Wordsworth's treatment of the reading of Voltaire's *Candide* on pages 136-37, Wyatt commends the older Wordsworth's capacity to sustain contradiction in his later poetry through a distinguishing faculty that maintains the discreteness of natural elements (119). He does not see universal law as subsuming individuality, but rather as "encouraging faith in the individual" (114). Wyatt cites Abrams's view that "what was most distinctive in Romantic thought was the normative emphasis ... on an organized unity in which all individuation and diversity survive" (127). However, as I argue in this postscript, it is precisely Wordsworth's collapsing of "individuation and diversity" into "organized unity" that is *The Excursion*'s major objective.

rules out individualism as a rationale for community. His speaker observes that states and kingdoms have failed as repositories of justice: “Earth is sick, / And Heaven is weary of the hollow words / Which States and Kingdoms utter when they talk” (*Excursion* 5.378-80). Smaller rural communities have marginally greater success in reconciling sociability with individualism. But even here only an elect “few ... mingle with their fellow-men / And still remain self-governed” (5.385-86). Nature is similarly unable to balance personal integrity with social cohesion. In spite of their misleadingly peaceful demeanor, the country villagers living close to nature “partake man’s general lot / With little mitigation,” facing disappointment and the squandering of their potential like everyone else (5.427-28). The catastrophic results of Rousseau's social theory are demonstrated by the Solitary, who is driven to suicidal despair by radical rhetoric. The pastor consoles him:

We may not doubt that who can best subject
The will to Reason’s law, and strictliest live
And act in that obedience, he shall gain
The clearest apprehension of those truths,
Which unassisted reason’s utmost power
Is too infirm to reach. (*Excursion* 5.513-17)

The Solitary, who allegorically represents the private will, overcomes individualistic revolutionary theory and embraces a more general authority. The enjambment of “[t]he will” to the verb “subject” syntactically enacts a new model, whereby individuality is relegated to broader contexts.

Elsewhere, Wordsworth clearly criticizes the ills of individualism. Like Rousseau who asserts that dissident elements in the social body must be “forced to be free,” the Wanderer suggests that a surfeit of freedom paradoxically produces enslavement.

Consequently, individual freedom must be curtailed. Describing a very poor but happy aging couple, the Wanderer exclaims:

O happy! yielding to the law
Of these privations, richer in the main! –
While thankless thousands are opprest and clogged
By ease and leisure; by the very wealth
And pride of opportunity made poor . (Excursion 5.828-32)

The oxymoron of privations that make one richer, or of being “opprest and clogged / By ease,” suggests that individual agency is incompatible with the greater good and eventually also harmful to the individual. Total submission to collective laws is presented as the optimal form of personal and political freedom.

In a scene that symbolizes this shift from the individual to a model of natural sociability, Wordsworth's characters chance upon a mildewed copy of *Candide*, which is being used to support a dilapidated children's playhouse. They deem *Candide* the “dull product of a scoffer's pen” and blame it for leading the Solitary astray (Excursion 2.510). Its location indicates Wordsworth's critique of enlightenment values. As Kenneth Johnston argues, “[t]he allegory is obvious: a ruined ‘petty’ civilization founded on ‘no better stay’ than ... [Voltaire's] caustic rationalism” (268). Its compost-like status indicates Wordsworth's ironic take on Voltaire's suggestion that social wellbeing starts with private happiness in his call to “cultivate our gardens” (Voltaire 130). By categorizing *Candide* as refuse, Wordsworth indicts individualism and suggests that “cultivat[ing] our gardens” leads to the Solitary's solipsistic demise and to social breakdown through the French Revolution. The state of nature, the enlightenment garden of individuality, does not foster social harmony and cohesion, but strews ruin. Wordsworth's portrayal of Voltaire and Rousseau as “bad weeds” in the *Tract on the*

Convention of Cintra ironically subverts the botanical imagery favored by both writers to suggest that individualist philosophy does not yield an organic social model (*Cintra* 177).

Wordsworth writes during a crucial period in which society departs from its former model of innate sociability, but has not conceptualized how private individuals are to live together. Initially in the 1805 *Prelude*, Rousseauvian social thought endows individuals with an unprecedented freedom to form a society tailored to meet their specific needs. But when Wordsworth is inspired by Rousseau to reject the notion of innate sociability, he is left with a deficient concept of society. He recognizes that Rousseau cannot overcome the paradox of a society formed merely to protect individuals from each other. The vestiges of a more traditionalist social model represented by Wordsworth's turn to his vocation as a poet as a means of self-assertion have been elicited and extensively criticized by new historicist scholarship. But Wordsworth derives his position from Rousseau's literary works, which posit intermediate areas between the individual and society as potential sites of agency and subversion. In developing his identity in the unprecedentedly involved and introspective *Prelude*, Wordsworth explores individuality and the literary text as the bases for a broader understanding of society. More than two hundred years later, questions of what unites private individuals and whether cultivating one's garden can benefit society still preoccupy contemporary culture. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, written a generation after the *Social Contract* and in the wake of the French Revolution, one of the first attempts to place the private individual at the foreground of society, anatomizes the inception of this modern dilemma.

Chapter 3

"All Play Their own Tune": Individuality and Sociability in *Political Justice* and *Fleetwood*

"But what shall we say of this [Godwin's] sort of philosophy, which builds the fabrick of morals on a dereliction of all the principles of natural affection, which cuts the ties of gratitude, and pretends to extend our benevolence by annihilating the sweet bonds of domestic attachment?... O for the spear of Ithuriel, whose potent touch shall make the lurking fiend appear in his proper shape, when, as I suppose, in the form of false philosophy, he attempts to instill into the heart of Mother Eve [vain aims.]"
(Hamilton 271)

In *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, Elizabeth Hamilton seeks to expose the wrongs of William Godwin's radical individualism, which masquerades as a theory of universal sociability. Writing to her brother Henry, the virtuous and altruistic Maria Sydney compares herself to the angel Ithuriel, who unveils Milton's Satan "squat[ting] like a toad, close to the ear of Eve," like Godwin's dissembling individualism (Hamilton 271 N. 84; *PL* iv. 799). Hamilton satirizes the idiosyncratic quality of Godwin's vision through the metaphor of musical composition: "you are not to imagine, that in the reasonable state of society to which they are advanced, that any man will condescend to perform the compositions of another. All compose for themselves; all play their own tune; no two in the same key!" (143) M. O. Grenby suggests that Hamilton, like others in her period, viewed Godwin's radical individualism as "a cover for something else. This might be personal libertinism, the desire to grow rich at the expense of others, or sometimes merely personal spite. New philosophy ... had no shape or substance independent of the debauched will that directed it" (124-25).¹ Despite Godwin's

¹ Godwin's much maligned theory of anarchism, together with the failure of the French Revolution, and a contemporary clamp-down on radicalism inspired the conservative genre of the anti-Jacobin novel in 1790s Britain. Charles Lloyd prefates *Edmund Oliver*, by explaining that he writes it to counteract Godwinism (3 N). Sophia King's *Waldorf; or, The Dangers of Philosophy*, and Edward Dubois's *St Godwin: A Tale of the*

excessive sincerity, Hamilton classifies his political theory as an empty rhetoric that conceals individual interests.² Following these earliest anti-Jacobin critics, scholars have often since resolved the complex relations between sociability and individualism in Godwin's texts by divorcing these positions from one another. But Godwin's texts are concerned precisely with their intersection, a problem which he derives in part from Rousseau.

This chapter studies the relationship between two very different works which both engage directly with Rousseau's conflicted legacy: Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793, 1796 and 1798), and *Fleetwood: Or, the New Man of Feeling* (1805). I also consider Godwin's treatment of *Fleetwood's* central themes of misanthropy and spousal abuse in *Mandeville* and *Deloraine*, following Marilyn Butler's suggestion that Godwin's novels "[are] so similar in their essential features that it is as meaningful to speak of the Godwin novel as of the Austen novel" (Godwin, "Autobiography" 26). Godwin translated *The Confessions* intermittently between 1789 and 1804 (Kelly, "Romance" 95). In *Political Justice*, he adopts Rousseau's argument that individuals are

Sixteenth, Seventeenth, and Eighteenth Centuries are also parodies of the ills of Godwinian philosophy. Even Wordsworth devotes Book Ten of *The Prelude* to an analysis of the emotional damage caused by Godwin's excessive individualism. Grenby explains that anti-Jacobin writers viewed Godwinian philosophy as "a set of non-principles cobbled together to give the most flimsy of theoretical bases to the desire of malicious individuals" (75). This became the dominant reading of Godwin and other radical writers: "[f]rom the early 1790s onwards conservative novels consistently outnumbered the radical fictions that had provoked them into being, and by the turn of the century succeeded in almost entirely vanquishing *Things As They Are* ... from the bookseller's lists and the circulating libraries' shelves" (169).

² Godwin advocates "plain dealing, truth spoken with kindness, but spoken with sincerity ... the most wholesome of all disciplines" (*Variants* 162). This produced the brutally candid *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which, according to Robert Southey, Godwin inadvertently expressed "the want of all feeling in stripping his dead wife naked," and exposing her carefully-kept secrets (qtd. Carlson 41). Godwin concedes, "I have a singular want of foresight on some occasions, as to the effect what I shall say will have on the person to whom it is addressed" ("Character" 58).

Hamilton's misreading of Godwin as concerned with manipulation, rather than more substantive philosophical issues, is typical of the anti-Jacobin genre as a whole. Thus, Grenby observes that "*Modern Philosophers* never becomes a satire of ideas" (70). Burton Pollin forms a similar criticism of Charles Lloyd's indictment of Godwinian individualism, "[o]ne wonders whether Lloyd ... had read *Political Justice* with any care to endeavor to understand it" ("Lloyd" 642).

born free; yet he also maintains the more traditional premise that people are born sociable. Godwin seeks to reconcile these two positions by rejecting elements of Rousseau's argument that emphasize the importance of government. Instead of government, Godwin suggests that innate sociability sufficiently guarantees social cohesion.

As seen in the previous discussion of Wordsworth, natural sociability was a common position in the Romantic period. But Godwin is the only major Romantic writer to employ the popular concept of natural sociability to support a position of radical individualism. Conversely, he is also the only radical individualist to advocate a theory of mechanical determinism. Godwin prescribes that individuals defer to society's needs "with the same unalterable firmness of judgment and the same tranquility as [to] ... the truths of geometry" (*Justice* 173). But like Rousseau, Godwin argues that this submission is all in the service of the individual, who needs to be protected from the assaults of others, both on personal and also on larger, more institutional levels. However, whereas Rousseau still allows for the freedom of the will in his famous directive to choose freedom through coercion (cf. *Contract* 141), Godwin's theory annihilates the private will entirely.

In addition to Godwin's engagement with Rousseau's conflict between individual and social needs, Godwin also provides a compelling example of the confluence of political theory and literature studied in this dissertation. In a manner typical of the social contract tradition, Godwin argues that literature is a vehicle for popularizing philosophical ideas (cf. *Justice* 14), while actually allocating literature the task of criticizing philosophy. In his fiction, Godwin revisits the Rousseauvian subject, but from

a perspective that further emphasizes social fragmentation. Godwin's novels question the vision of social recuperation set forth in *Political Justice*. They consistently demonstrate the failure of community and collectivism over the course of his forty-year career. These are not merely cautionary tales of misguided individuals who need to be brought back to their communities, although unquestionably Godwin is very critical of his protagonists. Rather, Godwin rejects the concept of society that isolates these characters and promotes their suffering. This chapter focuses on *Fleetwood*, where Godwin directly explores the critical relationship between the sentimental novel and political theory.³ Casimir Fleetwood, the novel's protagonist, is raised on Émilian principles of freedom and excessive individualism. Fleetwood's mentor, Mr. Macneil, espouses a theory of natural sociability and is a friend of the deceased Rousseau, of whom he is also very critical. Fleetwood marries Macneil's daughter Mary, who echoes Mary Wollstonecraft both in her character and in her reservations about Rousseau. But midway in the novel, this marriage breaks down, and with it Rousseauvian individuality, Macneil's values of natural sociability, and the conventional gender hierarchy. *Fleetwood* thus departs from *Political Justice*'s ambivalent affirmation of these various philosophical traditions, developing direct criticisms of Rousseau and of natural sociability.

³ G. A. Starr argues that typically, sentimental novels focus on an individual character who "cannot grow up and find an active place in society" (181). These characters are synecdoches for fissures in the broader social fabric.

The Personal is Political: *Political Justice* and Rousseauvian Conflict

"Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness. Society is in every state a blessing; government even in its best state but a necessary evil."
(*Justice* 48)

Critics often tend to resolve the conflict between Godwin's Rousseauvian concern with the individual and his focus on social theory by organizing these closely intertwined aspects of his work into distinct chronological phases. The date of Godwin's purported turning point from the political to the sentimental and the personal, rather than the actual relevance of this model, is thereby the main topic of debate. Mark Philp, Gary Kelly, Paul Hamilton, John Bender and Pamela Clemit all argue that Godwin first identified with revolutionary politics and Rational Dissent, and then shifted to a more sentimental approach informed by Rousseau's literary texts and by aspects of Hume's thought (*Political* 38, 153; *Jacobin* 192; 43; 125; 167). Mona Scheuermann distinguishes between earlier themes of political radicalism in *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*, and the subsequent psychological preoccupations of *Fleetwood* and *Deloraine* (16-17). Evan Radcliffe classifies *Political Justice* as an anti-narrative text, contrasting it with a subsequent emphasis on subjective narratives in *Caleb Williams* and in Godwin's other novels (532). William St. Clair suggests that Godwin pursued the rationalism of "Locke and Hartley through Hume and the French *philosophes* to its culmination in *Political Justice*," only turning to Rousseau's confessional mode in the late 1790s (184).

This accepted model of Godwin having a non-Rousseauvian political phase, and then a sentimental literary one, neglects the significant ties between the two genres. It also simplifies Hume's influence, and underplays that of Rousseau. Historicist scholars place an emphasis upon Godwin's assertion that Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* led

him to attribute greater agency to the individual than in the original version of *Political Justice* ("Opinion" 54).¹ They also attend to Godwin's criticism of the 1793 *Political Justice* for overlooking individual feeling and "private affections" (53). Godwin indeed suggests that the earlier version neglected "the humbler part of our nature," and the fact "that man is a fluctuating and variable animal" (*Variants* 419). In the preface to *St. Leon*, Godwin argues that after completing *Political Justice*, he has since come "[to] apprehend domestic and private affections as inseparable from the nature of man" (*Leon* 52). Frank B. Evans traces this focus on individual perception instead of "actions in the material world" to Hume (633-34).² But in my discussion of *Fleetwood*, I suggest that Godwin was also critical of Hume, to whom he alludes through the character of Mr. Macneil.

Godwin's positions regarding Hume, Rousseau and the social contract are therefore ambivalent from their inception. Godwin's advertisement to the 1798 version of *Political Justice* classifies his "alterations ... though numerous ... [as] not of a fundamental nature" (*Variants* 8). Godwin maintains that he has not "change[d] ... the principle of justice, or any thing else fundamental to the system" (*Leon* 52). Instead, he explains *Political Justice*'s continuing development in terms of an inevitable dynamic of perfectibility, rather than any more significant change of views (*Variants* 7). Godwin's main positions and conflicts therefore remain stable. Thus, although critics suggest that

¹ When Godwin's diaries become digitally available in October 2010, I hope to compare his claim that he read Hume's *Treatise* after publishing the first version of *Political Justice* with records of his readings in the diary. St. Clair notes that "his first duty in the autumn of 1791 was to reread his most important predecessors beginning with Plato and including Rousseau, [and] Hume," thereby implying that Godwin may have read Hume's *Treatise* earlier than he suggests in his discussion of his "Principle Revolution of Opinions" (59).

² Godwin also seems to share Hume's theory that society is formed in response to the suffering of individuals in the state of nature, who rely upon mutual support to survive: "[t]he subsistence of mankind in a solitary state is in the utmost degree precarious, scanty and miserable From whatever point therefore we imagine society actually to have begun, its greatest advantage appears to consist in an interchange of benefits" (*Variants* 103). This argument is also present in the 1793 version (cf. *Justice* 404).

Godwin's relationship with Wollstonecraft in 1796 altered his opinions on domesticity, he retains his criticisms of marriage and biological parentage throughout all versions, as well as in his novels (337, 340).³ He is less affected by discrete chronological phases than by inherently conflicting positions.

New historicist critics recognize Godwin's fundamental ambivalence, but associate it with socio-historical evasion, whereby the Romantic text displaces political context with private concerns (cf. McGann, *Ideology* 90). Paul Hamilton notes that "Godwin, as much as Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey, was accused of political apostasy of a kind to throw doubt on his early radicalism" (43). New historicism and anti-Jacobinism, otherwise antithetical approaches, share a view of the Romantic text as disingenuous and indirect. Jacques Khalip explains that behind this criticism is the notion that "in order for history to be transparent and recognizable, it has to be perceived as a palpable ... source of confessional power" (10). Khalip reexamines Rousseau's narratorial persona in *The Confessions* to challenge the traditional argument, here expressed by William Brewer, that "Godwin ... embraced Rousseau's project of making the human mind transparent" (Brewer, *Anatomies* 83). He suggests that both Rousseau and Godwin regard the reticent, unreliable narrator as a potent vehicle for political critique (73). Khalip focuses on Rousseau's and Godwin's "romantic constructions of impoverished subjects, absented from social recognition and self-display [as] ... instances of new potentialities" which subvert the dominant positivist, humanist tradition (4). Khalip suggests that encountering "inscrutability to ourselves precedes our relationship to others," as only through this means can we recognize the other as other (24). From a

³ Mitzi Myers and Paul Hamilton both argue that Godwin becomes more sentimental after his marriage to Wollstonecraft (310-11; Hamilton 43).

different perspective, James Treadwell notes that in *The Confessions*, Rousseau describes situations that are both singular and distancing to the reader, such as the abandonment of his children (51). Only by withdrawing to the margins of society does the Rousseauvian/Godwinian subject achieve freedom from social coercion. Godwin thereby provides a very different model to that suggested by anti-Jacobin, historicist or new historicist critics. His writing is less influenced by chronological phases or by the upheaval of the French Revolution, and is more affected by Rousseau's subversive narrative style in *The Confessions*, and by the inherent conflicts of Rousseau's texts.

Several critics have commented on Rousseau's influence on both tacit and overt aspects of Godwin's writings. Butler observes that Godwin creates "introspective, first-person narrator[s] ... in the self-expressing style inaugurated by Rousseau" (Godwin, "Autobiography" 26). Clemit also comments that "Godwin ... presents an alternative model of Romantic self-scrutiny, which highlights the interdependence of personal and historical experience" (176). A chronological approach to Godwin's writings obscures the conflict between the private individual and broader society in his work, because his positions are interpreted as discrete phases rather than interrelated ambivalences.⁴ Philp acknowledges Godwin's tendency to conflict, suggesting that this is an intentional strategy, which Godwin uses to open up his texts to debate. But Philp's argument minimizes the importance of the actual conflicts themselves, which are understood as mere ploys to catalyze discussion:

⁴ The distinction between private, sentimental literature and political theory exists neither in Rousseau's works, nor in Godwin's approach to them. Yet it was already common in Godwin's times. See the discussion in the chapter on the social contract, on page 53; **p** Kelly argues that late eighteenth-century English readers tended to divide Rousseau's works into discrete political and literary categories ("Romance" 93).

We are better placed to understand both the unity and the distinctiveness of Godwin's oeuvre if we recognize that his philosophical speculations are precisely speculations: they are not foundations. What is foundational in his work is the basic conviction that private judgment and public discussion are the appropriate means for ... moral and political principles. (Philp, "Introduction" 19)

In a similar spirit to Philp, Khalip observes that "one can ascribe the contradictions less to inconsistencies and impossible paradoxes, and more to crucial formal ambivalences in Godwin's philosophy" (93). But Khalip also suggests that these "formal ambivalences" express a contemporary language of political reform, whereby "experimenting with inwardness can spill over into revolutionary unrest," thus extending inner-conflict into political turbulence. Despite his argument against "inconsistencies and impossible paradoxes" in Godwin's work, Khalip recognizes a double standard whereby Godwin maintains both "a depleted theory of the subject," and a contrary notion of the individual as the empowered agent of political dissent.

In considering Godwin's fundamental ambivalences, I suggest that they are less affected by formal strategy, and more connected to conflicts that he derives in part from Rousseau. On the one hand, Godwin follows Rousseau in privileging individuals as originally self-governing units: "Society is nothing more than an aggregation of individuals. Its claims and duties must be the aggregate of their claims and duties" (*Justice* 54). He thereby espouses the social contract thesis that "[t]he end of government is the good of mankind," which replaced Aristotle's two-thousand-year-old maxim that "the whole is necessary to the part" (Locke, *Second* 378; Aristotle 11).⁵ Godwin also echoes Rousseau's fantasy of an idealized presocial condition set forth in the *Second Discourse*: "inequality was in its origin infinitely less than at present. In the uncultivated

⁵ Although Aristotle and Locke present binary accounts of socialization, J. S. Maloy notes points to similarity in their thought. Locke is influenced by Aristotle's rejection of tyranny, and espousal of community-rule (246, 253).

state of man diseases, effeminacy and luxury were little known [T]he understanding of all were limited, their wants, their ideas and their views nearly upon a level" (*Justice* 63). But on the other hand, Godwin rejects Rousseau's individualism. He recalls his first, formative impression, whereby his instructor conveyed "ineffable contempt, of Rousseau, and other chicken-hearted doctrinists" to the young, impressionable Godwin ("Autobiography" 34). Godwin explains that "[d]uctility is a leading feature of my mind ... [the tutor's] sentiments speedily became mine" ("Opinions" 52). As an adult, Godwin comes to criticize Rousseau's argument that self-love automatically produces social wellbeing (*Variants* 199). Instead, Godwin maintains that individuals need to form a more significant social concern which exceeds merely "doing no injury" to others (195):

If, as Rousseau has somewhere asserted, 'the great duty of man be to do no injury to his neighbour,' then this negative sincerity may be of considerable account: but, if it be the highest and most indispensable business of man to study and promote his neighbour's welfare, a virtue of this sort will contribute little to so honourable an undertaking. (*Variants* 165-66)

Godwin reacts to Rousseau's thin social model by developing a counter-theory of innate sociability. He proposes that "Man is a social animal. How far he is necessarily so will appear, if we consider the sum of advantages resulting from the social, and of which he would be deprived in the solitary state" (*Justice* 404). Individuals participate in a larger system of necessity, whereby "all the parts ... are strictly connected with each other, and exhibit a sympathy and unison by means of which the whole is rendered intelligible" (272). They must defer to this unison "with the same unalterable firmness of judgment and the same tranquility as [to] ... the truths of geometry" (173). Godwin maintains that personal differences are "accidental varieties. There is but one perfection to man" (*Variants* 118).

Godwin criticizes Rousseau for being excessively individualistic. But he forms this critique by appealing to Rousseau's writings, invoking a contrary, coercive aspect of Rousseau's work – and re-investing it with positive significance. Godwin understands that Rousseau idealizes presocial individuality because Rousseau seeks to counteract his oppressive concept of sociability. In response, Godwin redefines sociability as a vital bond among individuals, but also retains elements of its oppressive connotations. He seeks to reformulate Rousseau's premise that "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains" in positive terms: "[t]race back the chain as far as you please, every act at which you arrive is necessary" (Rousseau, *Contract* 131; *Justice* 165). Godwinian necessity guarantees that people are not isolated individuals, but part of a greater whole: "[h]uman affairs, through every link of the great chain of necessity, are admirably harmonised and adapted to each other" (*Justice* 118). Peter Howell notes this paradoxical quality of Godwin's image of society as a chain, whereby Godwin both privileges and abnegates individuality:

To be an individual ... at the extreme of the Godwinian sense, is to empty oneself of individuality The world is not like the rational society wished for by contractarians, in which each individual negotiates to optimize personal utility ... which turns out to be to the ultimate benefit of the whole of society ... instead, this view of reality is flipped ever so quietly on its head. Individuals do not force a crack in the great chain of being: they are a link in it, inevitably and necessarily, and their identity depends on those links. (Howell 78)

Howell suggests that Godwin's ambivalence toward individualism distinguishes him from individualistic social contract writers. But this ambivalence toward individualism is actually a direct legacy of the social contract tradition. St. Clair comments on Godwin's repeated use of the chain as a metaphor of causation, which "with suitable poetic ambiguity ... was now successfully linked to the other chains;" notably, the "Great Chain

of Being" with its implications of natural sociability and the less benign "icy chains of custom" with their connotations of coercion (89). Godwin ambivalently associates membership in the greater social body with both cohesion and coercion.

In his rejection of Rousseau's social theory, Godwin radicalizes Rousseau's qualification of individual freedom, transforming it into an extreme form of determinism, whereby he posits the mind as a mechanism acted upon by greater forces. Godwin explains that he derives this position from "Locke on Human Understanding ... and those respecting education from the Emile of J.-J. Rousseau" (*Justice* 13). Empiricist epistemology empowers the individual as the site of perception and experience, but also endows the environment with ontological priority. Godwin deems moral character the result of impression rather than inherent predisposition: "We bring into the world with us no innate principles: consequently we can be neither virtuous nor vicious as we first come into existence" (10).⁶ According to this view, he suggests that "Morality in a rational and designing mind is not essentially different from morality in an inanimate substance. A man of certain intellectual habits is fitted to be an assassin, a dagger of a certain form is fitted to be his instrument" (368).⁷ The subject is a phenomenal element rather than a rational agent, and has no real grasp of causality. Godwin compares the mind to a billiard ball, acted upon by other balls, "[a] vehicle through which certain causes operate" (168). Through this metaphor, Godwin cites Hume's influential critique of *a priori* assumptions of cause and effect: "We fancy, that were we brought on a sudden into this world, we

⁶ In 1796, Godwin somewhat modifies this opinion, suggesting that experiences in the womb can produce enduring differences among individuals (*Variants* 23, 238).

⁷ Elizabeth Hamilton parodies this position in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*. Bridgetina Botherim replies to her mother's request to entertain their guests, "And do you think I am now *at liberty* to remain here? Have I not told you again and again that I am under *the necessity* of preferring the motive that is most preferable?" (46). Hamilton thereby presents Godwinian necessitarianism as a manipulative pretext for flaunting familial and social duties.

could at first have inferred that one billiard-ball would communicate motion to another upon impulse" (Hume, *Understanding* 23). Via this example, Hume suggests that causes are beyond human understanding, and that the concept of agency reflects a false impression of causality. We cannot actually master why things work the way they do, but can only attempt to understand them through empirical observation.

Like Hume, Godwin subordinates the individual to forces which are beyond personal control. In a notorious example of the low premium which he places on private needs, Godwin proposes "the illustrious archbishop of Cambray ... of more worth than his chambermaid, and there are few of us that would hesitate to pronounce, if his palace were in flames, and the life of only one of them could be preserved, which of the two ought to be preferred" (*Justice* 50). Godwin suggests that "it would have been just in the chambermaid to have preferred the archbishop to herself. To have done otherwise would have been a breach of justice" (50). In revising *Political Justice*, Godwin criticizes self-interest by applying this scenario to the sacrifice of oneself, one's spouse, one's benefactor, one's parent, and one's sibling (*Variants* 63). He emphasizes that moral duty must overcome narrow personal circumstances to reflect broader social utility. Godwin evokes an expansive social vision to support this argument: "[w]e are not connected with one or two percipient beings, but with a society, a nation, and in some sense with the whole family of mankind. Of consequence that life ought to be preferred which will be most conducive to the general good" (*Justice* 50). Godwin's radical denial of personal ties led Elizabeth Hamilton and others to argue that Godwin's philosophy incurs "a dereliction of all the principles of natural affection ... annihilating the sweet bonds of domestic attachment" (Hamilton 271). But Godwin's metaphor of the "family of mankind" suggests

the ongoing importance of private, domestic relations to this panoramic social perspective, despite his concomitant argument that private relations contradict political justice (*Justice* 50).

Godwin's conflicting concepts of radical determinism and of personal, voluntary action are therefore deeply connected. Godwin suggests that only through extreme social conformity are people liberated from the need for more pernicious political mechanisms.⁸ He formulates this highly unusual conjunction of radical positions of determinism and individualism in his pioneering theory of anarchy. Godwin explains that political institutions impede the individual's development of a sense of social justice: "Man is in a state of perpetual progress. He must grow either better or worse By its very nature, political institution has a tendency to suspend the elasticity, and put an end to the advancement of mind" (*Justice* 106). Godwin emphasizes that it is "necessary ... carefully to distinguish between society and government," maintaining their mutual exclusivity (48). He suggests that whereas natural sociability enhances individual liberties, political institutions are inherently oppressive (311). Like promises, political institutions tie people down to arbitrary conditions. Godwin thereby emphasizes that no one can endorse the entire fifty volumes of Blackstone's *Commentary on the Laws of England* over the course of future history (85). The expectation to keep personal and political promises is unrealistic, representing "an act little congenial with the strict principles of virtue" (*Variants* 99). Instead, Godwin maintains that anarchy best realizes "the perfection of the human character [which] consists in approaching as nearly as possible to the perfectly voluntary state We should remove ourselves to the farthest

⁸ In this regard, Godwin provides a compelling case of Michel Foucault's thesis that social control changed drastically in the late eighteenth century, moving from more traditional methods of external coercion to the internalization of social norms, which – in Foucault's view – was more insidious ("Reader" 203-04).

distance from the state of mere inanimate machines" (34). Thus, if Godwin had previously denied the importance of the private individual in his dilemma of the chambermaid and the Archbishop of Cambray, he now formulates a theory of natural sociability because it frees the private individual from coercive government, marriage, and the social contract, which all commit people to inflexible rules that can potentially contradict broader principles of morality. Ian Balfour observes that "[i]t is to Godwin and Wollstonecraft that we owe a version of the insight that the personal is the political, since any subject, for them, is a political subject from the start" (234). In characteristic Rousseauvian fashion, Godwin enlists a deterministic model of social conformity in order to promote a personal, individual perspective; conversely Godwin suggests that any such individual is always already political.

Poetical Justice

"To his [Rousseau's] merits as a reasoner we should not forget to add, that the term eloquence is perhaps more precisely descriptive of his mode of composition, than that of any other writer that ever existed." (*Justice* 273 N.)

Godwin is powerfully influenced by contrary registers of individualism and conformity, and by the interdisciplinary intersection between literature and social contract theory. Contrary to critical consensus, which separates his philosophy and fiction into discrete phases,⁹ Godwin's social theory has strong narrative elements. Conversely, his fiction dwells directly on the social contract tradition. Balfour comments that "[t]he transition from the theoretical program of the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* to the fictional narrative ... is not as problematic as one might expect, partly because *Political*

⁹ See for example Kelly, who argues that Godwin had unrelated radically political and sentimentally literary phases (*Jacobin* 220).

Justice was a story to begin with, a grand story of the torturous but inexorable progress of truth" (234). Godwin posits *Caleb Williams* as continuous with *Political Justice*, explaining that he writes "in a word, to disengage the minds of men from prepossession, and launch them upon a sea of moral and political enquiry" (*Caleb* 451). Similarly, in the introduction to *Fleetwood*, Godwin emphasizes that the goal of his fiction is to stimulate debate and generate social progress, "endeavouring by discussion and reasoning to effect a grand and comprehensive improvement in the sentiments of ... [society's] members" (*Fleetwood* 49). Godwin's fiction and philosophy share a common goal, seeking to reorganize political institutions such as marriage, government and the social contract.

But Godwin also distinguishes between literature and philosophy. Like Rousseau, he posits the novel as a vehicle for disseminating an inferior version of his political theory to a wider audience, while also privileging fiction with insight into political theory's underlying difficulties. Accordingly, two disparate views of Godwin have prevailed in contemporary studies of his writings. Many accept Godwin's assertion that his novels straightforwardly popularize *Political Justice*.¹⁰ In the preface to *Caleb Williams*, Godwin addresses his novel to "persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach" (*Caleb* 55). He asserts writing as the primary means of "improv[ing] the social institutions of man," and marks the advent of print as an important step in this process (*Justice* 115, 107). Noting Godwin's ambivalent relationship to literature, Philp speculates that Godwin probably turned to novel-writing because his political theory was rejected ("Introduction" 10). Godwin discusses the novel as a steady but unambitious source of income, which caters to an inferior "class of readers; consisting of women and boys" ("History" 463). Reflecting these values, Godwin

¹⁰ See for example Angela Esterhammer (289) and A. A. Markley (para. 1).

suggests that Rousseau's elegant rhetoric is secondary to his philosophical achievements:

"[t]o his [Rousseau's] merits as a reasoner we should not forget to add, that the term eloquence is perhaps more precisely descriptive of his mode of composition, than that of any other writer that ever existed" (*Justice* 273 N.).

But while dismissing rhetoric as embellishment, Godwin's comment on Rousseau also expresses an empiricist ambivalence toward language, which is seen as both subordinate to and as formative of empirical reality. Godwin uses the double-negative "not forget" and the tentative "perhaps" to forge a gap between his explicit praise of Rousseau's eloquence, and an implicit skepticism and defiance of Rousseau's approach (*Justice* 273 N.). He aptly expresses these reservations in literary form, drawing a causal relationship between typeset character, literary character and empirical reality through a pun on the word "character": "Man in society is variously influenced by the *characters* of his fellow men; he is an imitative animal, and, like the camelion, owes the colour he assumes, to the colour of the surrounding objects" (*Enquirer* 288, emphasis added). Godwin also describes himself during the act of reading as "a sort of intellectual camelion, assuming the colour of the substances on which I rest" (27). Thus, Godwin overtly posits a mimetic model of expression, whereby "Man ... is an imitative animal," a veritable chameleon, while also alluding to a discrete, formative quality of mimesis, whereby texts shape reality. In accordance with this tacit concept of the primacy of the literary text, Godwin's prose is far more widely read than his political theory, and often challenges its main ideas.¹¹ Thus, *Caleb Williams* subverts *Political Justice*, and is also more commonly read and studied.

¹¹As St.Clair observes, Godwin's novels do not reflect the political vision of *Political Justice*. Percy Shelley's poetry is "more Godwinian than Godwin had been," a more faithful adaptation of his theory than

Godwin's ambivalence toward literary language emerges most vividly in his discussion of Locke. Godwin praises Locke as "a man of uncommonly clear and masculine understanding" who focuses on "facts and phenomena" instead of "the invention of fanciful theories" (*Enquirer* 345, 347). Godwin echoes these principles in his own comments on writing, arguing that "[t]he true effect of a good style is to enable us to apprehend the ideas of our author without adulteration. We ... are conscious of no impediment Our first sensation from his writings, is that of his thoughts, and nothing else" (387). Thus, the admirable M. Ruffigny in *Fleetwood* posits books as inferior metonyms of their writers. He disdains "the cold, insensible, mechanically constructed pages and sheets A book is a dead man, a sort of mummy, embowelled and embalmed, but that once had flesh, and motion, and a boundless variety of determinations and actions" (*Fleetwood* 122). Through Ruffigny, Godwin thereby implies that texts are inferior signifiers which are only necessary because the signified is absent.

But Godwin also repeats Locke's covert ambivalence toward language by contradicting his anti-literary position with an antithetical literary praxis. In the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argues that "the signification of words" becomes "like a mist before people's eyes" (*Essay* 276). He suggests that such subjective "fictions of our fancies" can infelicitously lead readers astray "in the great wood of words" (324, 322). Godwin recognizes that Locke's use of figurative language in this passage flagrantly subverts his semantic content. Accordingly, he criticizes Locke's language for being "defective" and of "depraved taste" (*Enquirer* 347). Godwin suggests that Locke's "fine-spun, mystical and fruitless complexity, might have been better and

are Godwin's novels, which actually formulate a discrete point of view (341). For a similar argument, see also Handwerk ("Guilt" 941).

more clearly expressed in two lines" (312). However, Godwin formulates these abundant superlatives criticizing Locke in the same rich literary style which he takes pains to dismiss. Godwin employs the metaphor of "fine-spun ... complexity" to critique the use of figurative language. It is unclear whether this blatant contradiction is an ironic, intentional strategy for criticizing Locke on Godwin's behalf, or itself reflects an infelicitous Lockean double standard regarding language. Godwin's approach to rhetoric remains ambivalent and subversive. In the following section, I examine his subversion of *Political Justice's* concepts of progress, benevolence and natural sociability in *Fleetwood*, which exemplifies the independent perspective of Godwin's fiction in relation to his political theory.

Allegories of Sociability: *Fleetwood* and Rousseau

"The two leading features of my character are sensibility and insensibility.... It was my evil destiny to spend nearly the first thirty years of my life in the sense of a desert island."
(Godwin, "Character" 59)

In *Fleetwood*, Godwin forms a highly critical philosophical allegory, which subverts both *Political Justice's* Rousseauvian individualism, and its more utopian, deterministic positions. Handwerk suggests reading *Fleetwood* as "a novel of ideas," which dramatizes a divergent set of philosophical positions ("Misogyny" 379). Rousseau actually features in the novel as a fictional character, the deceased friend and mentor of Fleetwood's own friend and mentor, Mr. Macneil. In *Mandeville*, Shaftesbury appears in a similar manner, as a mentor and advisor that leads the protagonist astray. Godwin presents Rousseau and Shaftesbury as real, unreliable influences, whose ideas he clearly rejects. In *Fleetwood*, Godwin constructs Rousseau and the protagonist as doubles, united

by their friendships with Macneil, by a similar approach to education, by parallel predicaments of isolation and melancholy, by a shared suspicion of women, and by a love of freedom. As Kelly observes, *Fleetwood* is also imbued with *Julie's* pastoral, alpine Romantic landscapes (*Jacobin* 239). In addition to Rousseau, Godwin invokes Wordsworth and the broader Romantic movement. Kelly notes *Fleetwood's* resemblance to the Wordsworthian and Coleridgean solitary (241). Macneil, in turn, is identified with counter-Rousseauvian values of natural sociability, which undermine his benevolent intentions and lead to catastrophe. Finally, influenced by Wollstonecraft, Godwin criticizes Rousseau's approach to gender through the character of Mary Macneil. *Fleetwood* is therefore concerned with a range of philosophical figures and issues. It actively engages in *Political Justice's* central themes and conflicts of individual freedom, social conformity and marriage.

Godwin opens *Fleetwood* with a harsh indictment of Rousseau's *laissez-faire* system of education. Like *Émile*, *Fleetwood* is raised in isolation of social codes and institutions. Rousseau asks, "What must be done to train this exceptional man! We can do much, but the chief thing is to prevent anything from being done" (*Émile* 9). In *Émile*, Rousseau proposes sheltering children from society and allowing them to learn through their senses alone: "Let the child ... learn those things that are within his reach by experiment, and discover the rest by induction, but I would far rather he knew nothing at all about them, than that you should tell him" (134). Rousseau warns against the corrupting influence of "dependence on men, which is the work of society [D]ependence on men, being out of order, gives rise to every kind of vice" (58). *Fleetwood's* father adheres to Rousseau's theory, raising his son in radical seclusion to

love "Ruffigny and my own immediate ancestors," but "[to] hate... mankind" (*Fleetwood* 216). Because he has not been trained to conform to external standards or social codes, Fleetwood becomes misanthropic. He therefore refers to himself as "a spoiled child. I had been little used to contradiction, and felt like a tender flower of the garden, which the blast of the east wind nips" (54). Fleetwood blames his later loneliness on this "early solitude in Wales. I came into the world prepared to be a severe and unsparing judge" (215). Fleetwood is the product of his environment, confirming Godwin's view in *Political Justice* that "the moral qualities of men are the produce of the impressions made upon them" (*Justice* 13).

In his account of Fleetwood's childhood, Godwin echoes "Tintern Abbey," where Wordsworth compares himself to "a roe / I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides / Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams" ("Tintern," lines 68-70).¹² Fleetwood explains: "My earliest years were spent on mountains and precipices, amidst the roaring of the ocean and the dashing of waterfalls. A constant familiarity with these objects gave a wildness to my ideas, and an uncommon seriousness to my temper" (*Fleetwood* 53). He recalls feeling like "a wild roe among the mountains of Wales" (241). Fleetwood spends most of his adult years in the Lake District, which invokes Wordsworth. He also expresses a Wordsworthian fascination with states of reverie. In "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth recalls being "laid asleep / In body," so that he "becomes a living soul," all mind without body ("Tintern," lines 46-47). From an inverse perspective of being all body without mind, Fleetwood pursues states in which "the mind has neither action nor

¹² Kelly argues that Wordsworth's much-studied rejection of Godwin in *The Prelude* is paralleled with Godwin's equally abrasive criticism of Wordsworth, which has received far less critical attention (*Jacobin* 242). For a thorough discussion of Wordsworth's disillusionment with Godwin, see Nicholas Roe (*Wordsworth* 161-97).

distinct ideas, but is swallowed up in a living death" (*Fleetwood* 56). He explains that whereas night dreams are frightening, these daydreams are empowering, "inspir[ing] a certain tendency to despotism." Godwin's inversion of Wordsworth's "living soul" into a despotic "living death" expresses his negative appraisal of Romantic visionary experience and reverie. Elsewhere, Godwin connects reverie to escape from pain. Thus, Fleetwood anticipates Ruffigny's impending announcement of his father's death by fleeing to "visions of paradise ... of the pure rewards and enjoyments of a happier state" (126). These utopian dreams of "the wildest and most luxuriant of the uninhabited islands of the South Sea" are an antidote to the bitter reality that shortly awaits him (126). Following a similar dynamic, M. Vaublanc entices Ruffigny to work in the Lyons silk mills by presenting them as "so pure and exemplary a society" (147). Consequently, Ruffigny "long[s] to set my foot upon the threshold of the terrestrial paradise he described," an ironic contrast to the harsh reality of abuse and slave labor in the mills (147). From Fleetwood's escapism to Vaublanc's manipulation, from Rousseauvian education to Wordsworthian reverie, Godwin suggests that Romanticism conceals loss and subordination. He therefore critiques its model of idealization.

As an adult, Fleetwood comes to a partial understanding of the shortcomings of his Romantic upbringing. He recalls his youth as "a nonage, the infancy of man. It was visionary, and idle, and unsubstantial" (*Fleetwood* 93). Fleetwood does not become the exceptional man of *Émile*, but follows a mundane course of adventures "as for the most part have occurred to at least one half of the Englishmen now existing, who are of the same rank of life as my hero" (47-48). Neither does Fleetwood become the self-governing individual of *Political Justice*, whose intellectual powers render the need for organized

society obsolete (cf. *Justice* 207). Godwin thereby criticizes educational models which offer excessive freedom, and *Political Justice*'s optimistic vision of perfectibility. But the story of Ruffigny also demonstrates the damage caused by the opposite extreme of excessive coercion. Thus, Ruffigny suggests that their lack of liberty accounts for the low intellectual achievements of the poor, who come to reflect their harsh environments: "A mechanic becomes a sort of machine; his limbs and articulations are converted, as it were, into wood and wires" (*Fleetwood* 150). He determines that people are born with benevolent intentions toward others, "instinct[s] twined with the very fibres of our heart" (196). But these are easily corrupted: "It is probable, if I had continued much longer in the silk-mills of Lyons, I should have become such a being [an animated machine] myself" (161). Thus, Godwin rejects systems of education that either train the will to perceive itself as entirely free, or as entirely subordinate. In *Fleetwood*, Godwin is concerned with achieving a delicate balance, whereby the individual finds a place in society without forfeiting his autonomy. He therefore offers a more moderate position than that of *Political Justice*, which inscribes individual development within a trajectory of progress toward individual and collective freedom.

Fleetwood seeks to overcome his lonely upbringing and to become a member of society: "I felt what I was, and I pined for the society of my like. It was with inexpressible sorrow that I believed I was alone in the world" (*Fleetwood* 116). He realizes,

I do not wish to stand alone, but to consider myself as part only of a whole. If that which produces sensation in me, produces sensation no where else, I am subsequently alone But if there is a being who feels the blow under which I flinch ... that being is a part of myself. (*Fleetwood* 231-32)

In order to avoid solipsism and establish an experience of sympathy, Fleetwood turns to the empiricist theory of the universality of sensory perception. But this theory is divorced from practice. Fleetwood's antisocial upbringing leads him to seek society through an excessive regard for opinion and reputation. Fleetwood explains that "it was this ardent desire to be something, to record myself on the rolls of my species for some praiseworthy deed, that had haunted me forever, and poisoned my tranquility in every stage" (*Fleetwood* 326). He both criticizes and empathizes with Withers, who drowns himself after being ridiculed for his poetry (89). At Oxford and later in Paris, Fleetwood tries to fit in by exchanging his solitary childhood habits for debauchery (73). This short and admittedly standard period which "compose[s] the history of most young men, born to the inheritance of a considerable fortune, and whose education has been conducted in a style of liberal expense" precipitates disproportionate self-disgust and alienation (218).

Fleetwood explains:

I had contracted a contamination, which could never be extirpated. Innocence is philanthropical and confiding Innocence is a sort of magnetism by which one good heart understands another. It is peaceful when alone; and, when it comes out into the world, it meets with individual after individual whom it confesses for brothers. I had lost this touchstone. (*Fleetwood* 216-17)

In his reasoning, Fleetwood confuses the symptom with the cause. He is not contaminated by his affairs with the Countess and the Marchioness, but by a lack of sociability produced by an excessively individualistic education which then leads him to form inappropriate social relations.

Macneil seeks to redress the lacunae of Fleetwood's education. He introduces himself as "no humourist, nor misanthrope," an antidote to Fleetwood's, Wordsworth's and Rousseau's combined cultural legacies (*Fleetwood* 243). Macneil is intimately

familiar with the Romantic tendency to use imagination to displace human relations. He has resided in Wordsworth's native Windermere and also "possessed the confidence of the celebrated Jean Jacques Rousseau" (234). Macneil criticizes the intense visionary compensations which Romantic misanthropy and isolation activate:

[P]eople talk of the raptures of solitude; or with what tenderness they can love a tree, a rivulet, or a mountain. Believe me ... they deceive themselves There is a principle in the heart of man which demands the society of his like. He that has no such society, is in a state but one degree removed from insanity. (*Fleetwood* 251)

Macneil's criticism of Rousseau closely echoes Godwin's own negative portrait of "[t]he man of taste and liberal accomplishments" in *Political Justice* (*Variants* 211). This man "knows the pleasures of solitude, when man holds commerce alone with the tranquil solemnity of nature He partakes in the grandeur and enthusiasm of poetry. He is perhaps himself a poet" (211). But through this portrait, Godwin emphasizes the man of taste's inferiority to "the man of benevolence," who resembles Macneil himself: "Study is cold, if it be not enlivened with the idea of the happiness to arise to mankind" (211).

In *Fleetwood*, Godwin also distances himself from this model of benevolence. By introducing Rousseau as a real character into his novel, Godwin constructs a secret history of imaginary events that may have happened, given Rousseau's beliefs and biography.¹³ Catherine Gallagher comments on the function of the secret history, which incorporates real figures into novels and alters the details in the most subtle manner to study how such a change would dramatically alter events:

minimal revisions have the advantage of allowing us to uncover reality easily from the imagined scenario, whereas large-scale revisions, requiring extensively changed circumstances, put actuality out of reach. Hence the Enlightenment search for small causes with large results. (Gallagher, "Factual" 18)

¹³ I am grateful to Catherine Gallagher for her email correspondence clarifying the concept of secret histories.

Thus, Godwin's direct introduction of Rousseau into *Fleetwood* in the form of a secret history corresponds with Gallagher's analysis of "the '*petites causes*' preference: the focus on individual personality ... and a predilection for non-rational motives, mistakes and anomalies" to demonstrate how individuals precede and shape history ("Factual" 18). *Fleetwood* dramatizes the repercussions of Rousseau's philosophical system and its impact on individual lives.

Rousseau's appearance in *Fleetwood* stays so close to historical fact that its fictional status is almost imperceptible. Godwin suggests that "[Macneil] had resided much in foreign countries, and was supposed particularly to have possessed the confidence of the celebrated Jean Jacques Rousseau, who had been some years an inhabitant of the banks of Windermere" (*Fleetwood* 234). Thus, Macneil and Rousseau may either have met "in foreign countries," or closer to home. The details of their friendship echo Rousseau's biographical exile to England, where he was cared for by Hume, who arranged his lodgings in Staffordshire (Damrosch 432). At this time, Rousseau's mental health declined, leading Hume to assess: "he is plainly mad, having long been maddish" (qtd. Damrosch 432). In his relationship to Rousseau, Macneil echoes Hume – a Scottish man of letters who conducted an ambivalent dialogue with the mentally unstable Rousseau. Godwin emphasizes that "Mr. Macneil was a Scotchman" (*Fleetwood* 242). Like Hume, Macneil complains of Rousseau's mental health: "[Rousseau] lived ... toward the close of his life in a world of his own, and saw nothing as it really was I was convinced, from a multitude of indications, that Rousseau was not in his sober mind" (244). He ascribes this to "the displeasing events that had befallen him, or ... any seeds of disease kneaded up in his original constitution." He suggests that

Rousseau's ties to reality are thin: "He could so wholly abstract himself from this painful contemplation" (244). But he suggests that this abstraction reflects Rousseau's tenuous connections to reality. Ruffigny forms a similar criticism of "Rousseau and others [who] have surrendered themselves to the chimeras of a disturbed imagination, and ... believed that they were every where at the disposal of some formidable and secret confederacy" (154). This paranoia echoes Hume's complaints about Rousseau.

Fleetwood sympathizes with Rousseau's "constitutional temperament which was saturnine and sensitive," exacerbated by a solipsistic environment (*Fleetwood* 215). He describes himself in Rousseauvian fashion as "the most capricious and wayward being that ever existed. I never remained permanently in one state of mind" (320). Godwin also clearly identifies with Fleetwood's conflicted Rousseauvian disposition. In analyzing himself, he determines that "[t]he two leading features of my character are sensibility and insensibility," a tendency to paradox resulting from hypersensitivity toward the self and an attendant lack of sensitivity toward the environment ("Character" 59). In the preface to *Fleetwood*, Godwin criticizes "[c]ertain persons, who condescend to make my inconsistency the favourite object of their research" (*Fleetwood* 48). Through the character of Fleetwood, Godwin suggests that this inconsistent temperament which critics target is culturally constructed, the result of an excessively individualistic value system shaped by Rousseauvian concepts. The misanthrope is a standard character-type of the sentimental novel, reflecting a radical individualism which cannot incorporate broader sociability (Mackenzie viii).

Following his negative experience with Rousseau, Macneil endeavors to reform Fleetwood's empathetic bonds and integrate him into society. He explains: "In every man

that lives ... there is much to commend. Every man has in him the seeds of a good husband, a good father, and a sincere friend" (*Fleetwood* 248). He draws Fleetwood's attention to "How much good neighborhood there is in the world! what readiness in every man to assist every stranger that comes his way I am a philanthropist, in the plain sense of the word. Whenever I see a man I see something to love" (249). Fleetwood is attracted to Macneil's rhetoric of harmonious social inclusion. He praises Macneil's own family as a model of ideal sociability, admiring their "concord of affection without any jarring passions; so much harmony of interests, yet each member of the family having a different pursuit" (246-47). To convey his values of natural sociability to Fleetwood, Macneil constructs a social allegory. He considers

composing a little novel or tale in illustration of my position. I would take such a man as my friend Fleetwood I would put him on board a ship; he will, of course, be sufficiently disgusted with every one of his companions I would cause him to be shipwrecked on a desert island, with no companion but one man, the most gross, perverse, and stupid of the crew[.] (*Fleetwood* 249)

Inevitably, Macneil suggests that this crew member would reconcile Fleetwood with the entire human community. His allegory invokes values of natural sociability, but also employs the social contract register of return to "a desert island" state of nature, from which Fleetwood will construct a new understanding of sociability.

In directing Fleetwood toward social happiness, Macneil determines that Fleetwood must develop a "certain and regular pursuit" which will help him establish "equal alliances and connections" with others (*Fleetwood* 251-52). Macneil concedes that Fleetwood is "too rich to be able to engage with sincere eagerness in any undertaking or employment" (255). Instead, he beseeches him to "Marry! Beget yourself a family of children! ... call about your distant relations! Sit down every day at table with a circle of

five or six persons, constituting your own domestic group" (252). Fleetwood's subsequent request to marry Macneil's youngest daughter Mary initially leads Macneil to doubt his own advice, and to remark "How difficult is it to put one's self exactly in the place of another" (257). Eventually, however, Macneil stakes his destiny on the notion that Fleetwood is naturally sociable, and will discover these instincts if given ample conditions: "If you are now wayward, and peevish, and indolent, and hypochondriacal, it is because you weakly hover on the outside of the pale of human society, instead of gallantly entering yourself in the ranks, and becoming one of the congregation of man" (259). In these comments, Macneil echoes Hume's theory that habit "not only reconciles us to anything we have long enjoy'd, but even gives us an affection for it" (*Treatise* 503). Habits eventually become second nature: "habit is nothing more than one of the principles of nature" (179). Marriage becomes the test case for the success of Hume's theory that one can become sociable through habit, and also serves as a metonymy for the social contract. Macneil entreats Fleetwood to "[s]ubject yourself to the law of associating with your fellow-men, place yourself in the situation to be the guardian and benefactor of your consort and kindred" (*Fleetwood* 255). He emphasizes the legal, contractual responsibilities of marriage, whereby Fleetwood will become "subject ... to the law." Macneil imagines that this will define Fleetwood's role within the community, and bridge between the self and others. Shoshana Felman observes that "'épouser' means both to marry and to promise. In a more general sense ... this may be identified with Austin's commissives/ espousals" which enact social duty (20). Macneil presents marriage as a speech act that will reconcile Fleetwood to social duty, based on a Humean assumption that people can become sociable via habit.

In *Political Justice*, however, Godwin expresses a different position. He classifies marriage together with other arbitrary laws, which tie people down to social arrangements that often contravene morality. Godwin emphasizes that despite popular opinion to the contrary, "promises and compacts are in no sense the foundation of morality," and can often stand in direct opposition to it (*Variants* 91). In this context, Godwin proposes the notion that "marriage is a system of fraud" (*Justice* 453). Despite the harshness of this assertion, Godwin explains that marriage actually reflects the best of intentions: "it really happens in this as in other cases, that the positive laws which are made to restrain our vices, irritate and multiply them" (454). Like government or the social contract, marriage is formed to protect individuals by committing them to social ties which are favorable only under specific circumstances. When these circumstances inevitably change, the commitment may become harmful. Godwin emphasizes that "truth and virtue ... will flourish most, when least subjected to the mistaken guardianship of authority and law" (323). Macneil's advice to Fleetwood is therefore well-intentioned, but ill-founded. In having to fit in with others, Fleetwood ceases to be a free spirit. Instead, he evolves into an abusive husband, and becomes ever more reclusive and idiosyncratic.

After dispensing his advice to Fleetwood, replete with the allegory of shipwreck and reform, Macneil himself is shipwrecked and perishes together with almost his entire family. Fleetwood later learns that the Macneils refused the captain's offer to rescue two of the four family members: "this kindred of love refused to be separated; they could not endure to pass lots on their lives ... father, mother, and daughters preferred to perish together" (*Fleetwood* 267-68). This demonstration of the Macneils' extreme altruism contradicts *Political Justice*'s utilitarian principles, where the potential contribution of an

individual to society overrides sentimental considerations (*Justice* 50). Godwin suggests that had two of the four Macneils survived, the subsequent narrative of spousal abuse would have been averted. As Mary later accosts Fleetwood, "if I had patrons and protectors still living, if I had not come dowerless to your bed, you could not have used me thus ungenerously" (*Fleetwood* 419). The shipwreck incurs the loss of the family wealth, Fleetwood's abuse of Mary, and the shattering of Macneil's interrelated myths of marriage, benevolence, sociability through habit, and empiricist social regeneration. Fleetwood and Mary express guilt about the Macneils' deaths, sensing that the Macneils have been sacrificed to darker, antisocial values played out in their subsequent marriage. Mary regrets her "infatuation [which] prevailed upon me to separate myself from them? It is a crime no less deep and terrible than parricide!" (264) Fleetwood imagines the Macneils "as so many victims, robed in white, and crowned with chaplets, marching along the beach, as to be sacrificed" (268).

The Macneils' tragic deaths mark a turning point in *Fleetwood*, whereby Godwin clearly criticizes values of sociability and sympathy. Elsewhere, Godwin seems to support a theory of natural sociability. Ambrose Fleetwood, Fleetwood's paternal grandfather, explains to Ruffigny why he adopted and raised him as his son: "You belonged to me, because you belonged to no one else. This is the great distribution of human society; every one who stands in need of assistance appertains to some one individual, upon whom he has a stronger claim than upon any other of his fellow creatures" (*Fleetwood* 195). Godwin gestures toward the possibility that misanthropic individuals may finally become reformed members of the community. Fleetwood reflects, "Through all the varieties of the human race, however unlike in their prominent features,

there are sufficient chords of sympathy and evidences of a common nature, to enable us to understand each other" (72). *Fleetwood* concludes with the story of the abusive Mr. Scarborough, who alienates his wife and drives his son to death, but eventually also makes amends with his family (403). Thus, "Mr. Scarborough, who had shown himself so harsh and austere a parent, became the most indulgent of grandsires" (423). Through this final tableau of reformed sociability, Godwin indicates that Fleetwood too might receive a second chance to become a devoted member of the human community, by reconciling himself to Mary and his son.

But it is unclear whether *Fleetwood* really does end on this happy note of resolution. If *Political Justice* promotes a crowning vision of individuals participating in a larger system of necessity "all the parts of which are strictly connected with each other, and exhibit a sympathy and a unison by means of which the whole is rendered intelligible," Godwin's novels take a far more skeptical approach (*Justice* 272). Alongside assertions of natural sympathy, Godwin also conceives of the individual in solitary terms, and of socialization via abuse and manipulation. Scheuermann comments on Godwin's departure from the eighteenth-century model of benevolence, whereby humans are posited as harmoniously disposed to form communities (20). In *Mandeville*, Godwin develops his vision of the inherent cruelty of human nature. *Mandeville* is set in the English Civil War, which is described as a brutish state of nature whereby "the Papist and the Protestant ... were to my thoughts like two great classes of animal nature, the one, the law of whose being it was to devour, while it was the unfortunate destiny of the other to be mangled and torn to pieces by him" (*Mandeville* 44-45). In this violent climate, "every man thrives by the ruin of another" (87). After the three-year-old Charles Mandeville's

parents are murdered by the Catholics, he is raised by his reclusive uncle in an environment "less ... of an animal, than a vegetable," much like Fleetwood (189). Philosophies of education, such as *Émile*, give little thought to the outcome of this antisocial upbringing: "The books are always written by those who are the professors of teaching, never by the subjects" (61). Mandeville is irrevocably maimed by his early loss and by this education: "Human nature is so constituted, that, till the propensity is cured, as mine had been, man naturally seeks the society of his like" (127).

As an adult, Mandeville develops into a misanthrope. He earns the patronage of the neo-Aristotelian philosopher Sir Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Earl of Shaftesbury (*Mandeville* 111-12). Here as in *Fleetwood*, Godwin uses the literary model of the secret history to critique Shaftesbury's theory of benevolence. It is plausible that Shaftesbury may have been a patron in the Civil War, and could have inadvertently misled gullible young men such as Mandeville. Mandeville eventually recognizes Shaftesbury's "discordant elements His mind was fluctuating and unstable, and unresolved He had set out in life a royalist: offended by some transaction ... he turned parliamentarian; and, shortly after, he endeavoured to organize a third party" (112). As a result of Shaftesbury's inconstancy and weakness, and of Mandeville's education, which limits his social judgment, Mandeville is defeated and branded like a slave (325). As in *Fleetwood*, Godwin incorporates an actual social theorist into *Mandeville* to account for contemporary social ills. He thereby directly critiques Shaftesbury's philosophy for its internal contradictions and instability, which fail to redress both a powerfully antisocial education, and the brutal indifference of individuals to each other.

In *Mandeville* and *Fleetwood*, Godwin firmly rejects benevolence. Despite Fleetwood's more general unreliability, it is important to note that Godwin supports his misanthropy within the context of the novel. Thus, Fleetwood virulently struggles to accommodate Macneil's theory. But "either because the truth was on my side, or, it may be, merely from the excessive susceptibleness of my nature ... I remained unaltered by his discourses, and, though I wished to be a philanthropist, was a misanthrope still" (*Fleetwood* 250). Macneil's advice to Fleetwood to marry Mary is based on false assumptions about empathy. His initial gut-reaction to Fleetwood's proposal of marriage is correct (257). Godwin thereby "permit[s Fleetwood], as a misanthrope, to remark, that the integrity of too many men has its limits," a perspective confirmed by numerous instances in the novel (270-71). The Genoese banker steals Mary's inheritance, Gifford plots to murder Fleetwood, and even Fleetwood himself abuses the orphaned and helpless Mary. Fleetwood painfully reflects that "one of the effects of wealth, [is] that with it we enlist men into our service to murder us" (391). Godwin's novels offer a more negative perspective on *Political Justice*'s Enlightenment faith in perfectibility, benevolence and natural sociability.

If Godwin's novels take a generally more pessimistic approach than does *Political Justice*, his position on marriage remains consistently negative across his work. In *Political Justice*, Godwin argues that "Human beings, who enter into the engagements of domestic life, should remember, that however man and wife may in interests and affections be one, yet no interests and affections can prevent them from being in many respects distinct" (*Justice* 303). Thus, the young and vivacious Mary and the jaded, misanthropic Fleetwood cannot overcome their fundamental differences and are ill-

matched. In *Political Justice*, Godwin maintains that "it is absurd to expect the inclinations and wishes of two human beings to coincide through any long period of time" (*Variants* 337). Aware of these limitations, Fleetwood recognizes that marriage is a threat to his autonomy: "Now I am free; I am master of my own actions and of my plans of life: before the clock shall strike again, it may be I shall be bound to the sacred ties of honour, and the stake of my future will be at the disposal of another" (*Fleetwood* 261-62). Godwin suggests that in a culture of individualism people are essentially alone, unable to form social and family ties, despite an innate need for companionship.

No Room of Her Own: Misogyny as a Test Case for Misanthropy

"My life has been all submission, submission to my father, submission to my husband.
But it shall be so no longer." (*Deloraine* 144)

Godwin's treatment of gender in *Fleetwood* raises major questions about his approach to the possibility of benevolence. Does Fleetwood finally overcome his misanthropic, abusive tendencies – to which his wife is subjected – or are these perpetuated in the novel's ending? As Steven Bruhm argues, "Fleetwood's marriage is always shadowed by the tensions of disbelief and paranoia," which undermine the credibility of his reconciliation with Mary (32). Is the reader to take this reconciliation literally, or ironically? And how are we to understand Fleetwood's assertion that "Till the softer sex has produced a Bacon, a Newton, a Homer, or a Shakespeare, I will never believe it" (*Fleetwood* 252)? Gary Handwerk reads such statements subversively: "*Fleetwood* is ultimately even more critical of the misogynistic tendencies of Rousseau's thinking than is Wollstonecraft's treatise" ("Misogyny" 378). Similarly, A. A. Markley argues that Godwin extends Wollstonecraft's critique of patriarchy into his novels (para.

1). By contrast, Handwerk dismisses the novel's happy ending of marital reconciliation as an unintentional novelistic embarrassment which obscures Godwin's more important criticism of misogyny: "however sentimentally pleasing this outcome may be, the novel's conclusion is unlikely to erase the more vivid images that precede it [I]t is Fleetwood's mad emotions and traumatic collapse that are likely to remain most powerfully in our minds" ("Misogyny" 397). Kelly also reflects on points of dissonance between the plot and Godwin's intention, classifying Godwin as a flawed novelist, who loses control of narrative organization: "Godwin's novels are strong in characterization, but weak in plot and structure. Like the Romantic poets, he was much more interested in situation and psychology than in narrative" (*Jacobin* 200). However, Butler reads such points of inconsistency as intentionally ironic: "[t]hese narrative voices are imperfect, so that, as they tell their stories, they unwittingly reveal to the reader their limited understanding of their motives and their circumstances" ("Autobiographical" 26). Clemit also notes Godwin's similar usage of the unreliable narrator: "Godwin employs a Rousseauvian confessional form to demonstrate that candid self-revelation may lead not to increased self-knowledge or social improvement, but to self-delusion" (174). Godwin thus criticizes his protagonists, whose perspectives he dramatizes through a first-person point of view. He operates through subversion rather than more direct avenues of reform.

Godwin differs from Rousseau's conservative approach to gender by reflecting on the exclusion of women, and by even gesturing toward the possibility of their independence. He is influenced by Wollstonecraft's criticism that "the private or public virtue of women is very problematical for Rousseau," who was unable to view women as political subjects (*Woman* 176). She rejects Rousseau's limiting notion of women as

objects of male desire: "'Educate women like men,' says Rousseau, 'and the more they resemble our sex the less power they have over us.' This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves" (85). In his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Godwin suggests that women should be equal to men. He praises "[t]he strength and firmness with which the author repels the opinions of Rousseau ... respecting the condition of woman" (*Memoirs* 75). But Godwin also seeks to accommodate Wollstonecraft to more conventional gender norms acceptable in the late eighteenth century. He acknowledges a "class of men who believe they could not exist without such pretty, soft creatures to resort to, [who] were in arms against the author of so heretical and blasphemous a doctrine" (75). This "class of men" constitutes Godwin's implied readers, to whom he apologizes for his wife's "somewhat amazonian temper," which obscures "a woman lovely in her person, and, in the best and most engaging sense, feminine in her manners" (75, 76). Godwin's conflicted attitudes toward women materialize in the character of Mary Macneil, who both asserts her right to independence, and defers to male authority.

Whereas Wollstonecraft writes in the first person female voice, Godwin's novels emphasize its silencing.¹⁴ In the preface to *Caleb Williams*, Godwin discusses his decision to construct his male protagonists in the first person, because it discloses the "private and internal operations of the mind" of the subject (*Caleb* 448). Whereas these male characters are complex individuals, Godwin's female characters are objects of the male characters' passions. Fleetwood's marriage to Mary thereby originates in a homosocial bond between Fleetwood and Macneil, who are initially attracted to one

¹⁴ Marguerite in *St. Leon* and Henrietta in *Mandeville* both challenge St. Leon and Mandeville, but ultimately submit to their pessimism and misanthropy.

another. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes, the Gothic novel is motivated by the unsettling realization that "[f]or a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred always-already-crossed line from being interested in men" (89).¹⁵ Fleetwood passionately courts Macneil and admires his "manly appearance" (*Fleetwood* 242). In turn, Macneil compliments Fleetwood as a handsome man, capable of winning a "beauteous bride" (254). Fleetwood's self-professed "favourite theory about the female sex" postulates that "however it might in certain instances be glossed over, all women were in the main alike, selfish, frivolous, inconstant, and deceitful" (317). Macneil voices a similarly chauvinistic but otherwise characteristically antithetical view that "Man marries because he desires a lovely and soothing companion for his vacant hours; woman marries, because she feels the want of a protector, a guardian, a guide, and an oracle" (254).

By contrast to Fleetwood and Macneil's positions and their view of Mary as an object of exchange, she conceives of herself as a distinct individual:

Mistake me not, my dear Fleetwood. I am not idle and thoughtless enough, to promise to sink my being and individuality in yours. I shall have my distinct propensities and preferences I hope you will not require me to disclaim them. In me you will have a wife, and not a passive machine. (*Fleetwood* 281)

Mary resists becoming the wax doll of Fleetwood's paranoid fantasies, which "grinned and chattered" to his will (*Fleetwood* 387). She prefers the Rousseauvian pursuit of botany to Fleetwood's chosen pastimes of reading and solitary withdrawal (246, 302). Accordingly, Mary seeks to transform Fleetwood's closet, his private sanctuary, into a

¹⁵ Much has been written on homosocial elements, homoerotic desire, and its attendant anxiety, in Godwin's novels, especially *Caleb Williams*. See Brewer ("Male"), Corber, Gold, Markley (para. 1), and Sedgwick (91-92).

room for developing her interests (293). Understandably, Fleetwood is threatened by this demand:

Lately the most independent man alive, I was become a mere appendage to that tender and charming trifle, a pretty woman. I adored my wife; but I had cultivated high ideas of the prerogatives of my sex, and I did not altogether relish the being thus reduced to a cipher. (*Fleetwood* 325)

He explains: "Loving her as I did, I felt she must be every thing, or nothing, to me. I could not bear that my wife should have amusements for which I felt no partiality" (*Fleetwood* 305). Fleetwood's excessive concern with reputation leads him to fear that reclaiming his closet and thus reasserting his mastery would disclose his selfishness. He projects these motives back onto Mary: "'Mary, Mary,' said I sometimes to myself, as I recurred to the circumstance, 'I am afraid you are selfish!'" (295) Although Mary is so exceptionally candid, "that it was scarcely possible to believe that a thought could pass in her heart, which might not be read in her face," Fleetwood reads her desire for autonomy as infidelity (246). Thus, when Mary requests company to overcome bereavement, Fleetwood suspects her of manipulation: "Artful hussy! In the way she put it to me, could I refuse?" (297)

Fleetwood's insanity culminates in the formation of a wax effigy of his wife, through which he seeks to regain control. Raised in a culture which values the solitary, male individual, Fleetwood is wary of fitting in with the needs of others. Already at Oxford, he employs the metaphor of the effigy to express his humiliation at having to adapt himself to his new environment: "I no longer gave free scope to the workings of my own mind, but became an artificial personage, formed after a wretched and contemptible model" (*Fleetwood* 73). Fleetwood experiences his marriage to Mary in similar terms, as a threat to his autonomy: "her smiles drew me from my most steadfast purposes, and

made me as ductile as wax to the aims she proposed " (317). Having been unable to reclaim his closet, he seeks to reassert mastery by forming a wax effigy of his wife. This displacement redresses Fleetwood's sense of subjection, whereby he feels that Mary manipulates him like "ductile ... wax." Bruhm argues that in this effigy scene, Fleetwood and Mary change places: "He becomes the victim He transforms the sentimental potential of the tortured body from 'I know how you feel' to 'This hurts me more than it hurts you'" (37). This displacement is successful in depriving Mary of her suffering, and with it her subjecthood. When Mary hears of her wax counterpart, she is more pained by Fleetwood's unhappiness than by her own: "[Kenrick] spoke of the supper I had celebrated on the fifteenth of July. On this she seemed to ponder. 'Poor Fleetwood!' she said" (*Fleetwood* 421). Mary overlooks her abandonment and destitution during pregnancy, based on unfounded accusations of adultery, and pities Fleetwood for his deluded jealousy. Through this scene and Mary's forgiveness, Godwin emphasizes that her virtue is in her capacity for submission. Her independence is therefore heavily qualified by patriarchy. She survives Fleetwood's abuse because "she had pride at the bottom of her heart, a pride that perhaps towered the higher, in proportion as it was slow to be awakened" (419). But this pride is based on her father's patronage: "[t]he daughter of Macneil shall never forgive this!" Mary survives in order to be reunited with her husband, and to help him embrace sociability despite his excessively individualistic disposition. Through Mary's help, he overcomes misanthropy, but does not question its culture of misogyny, whereby women serve as auxiliaries to men.

In *Deloraine*, Godwin further explores the dynamics of female marital submission. Deloraine, the protagonist, loses his beloved wife Emilia. He marries the

much younger Margaret Borrodale, whose lover William appears to have been shipwrecked. Deloraine is thus united with William through his bond with Margaret, and suggests that William is his real object of desire: "in my adherence to Margaret I was very woman" (*Deloraine* 139). Deloraine is able safely to realize his homosocial fascination with William through Margaret's "body [which] was a corpse, void of every thing offending and repulsive, but which on the contrary was more beautiful, more ravishing, more celestial, than any living mortal could ever be" (91). His fascination with William/Margaret is necrophilic in its celebration of Margaret's subaltern, subordinate status as a vacant conduit for relations between men. Margaret is "what a favourite toy or plaything is to an affectionate child She was like the fetiche of an Arabian devotee" (103). The fetish echoes Fleetwood's wax effigy, expressing an extreme form of subordination.

But when William unexpectedly returns and threatens to become a genuine and direct object of desire, Deloraine murders him, seeking to return William to his former status. This act is driven both by homophobic panic, and also by Deloraine's fear of losing possession of Margaret, who clearly prefers William. Yet at this point Margaret's lost vitality returns, "driving away from her all preceding weakness, and substituting instead an energy that seemed to exceed human energy. Volumes were comprised in that instance" (*Deloraine* 144). Margaret discovers her lost voice: "My life has been all submission, submission to my father, submission to my husband. But it shall be so no longer" (144). Ironically, this realization immediately precedes Margaret's death from a broken heart, which bursts a blood vessel. As Ranita Chattarjee explains, in this scene of momentary self-realization, "Margaret sacrifices herself on the altar of patriarchal

homoerotic exchange" (33). Godwin inscribes Margaret's voice within male authority. It is viable only inasmuch as it reflects patriarchal dynamics. When William dies, it is necessarily silenced.

In this scene, Godwin gestures toward individuals that are excluded from the culture of individualism. However, he remains more concerned with homosocial male dynamics than with women themselves, who finally remain outside of his textual economy. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley dwells on these politics of exclusion. She dedicates her novel to Godwin, and develops his engagement with Rousseauvian conflict. Whereas Godwinian individualism sanctions a culture based on exclusions, Shelley questions the foundations of a society that relies on these exclusions. Godwin finally remains circumscribed by Rousseau's positions, by his limiting concept of freedom as conformity, and by his constricting notion of individuality in general, and of female individuality in particular. He is surprisingly conservative, given his reputation as the first anarchist. Godwin's individualism is always already inscribed within social coercion, finally echoing Rousseau's principle that "Mankind ... everywhere ... is in chains" (*Contract* 131). Godwin regards misogyny as a particularly troubled subset of misanthropy, a legacy of the broader Romantic tradition of individualism. His protagonists endeavor to recover the benevolent impulses and innate sociability of more traditional political models, and to develop a deeper regard for one another. But they finally remain isolated and even hostile in their interpersonal dispositions. Like other Romantic writers, Godwin cannot think beyond the Rousseauvian Romantic framework of his era and beyond his own complicity in its gender politics, but astutely analyzes its weaknesses and the suffering of individual constituents within this system.

Chapter 4

Gender and the Social Contract: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Wollstonecraft and Rousseau

"Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself."
(Shelley, "Introduction to the 1831 *Frankenstein*" 178)

Unique among the Romantic writers considered in this dissertation, Mary Shelley inverts the hierarchy and suggests that the group, rather than the unitary individual, should be the foundational social unit. *Frankenstein* (1818) anatomizes a society that isolates and violently excludes its constituent individuals.¹ At the center of Shelley's novel stands Victor Frankenstein's creature, which embodies the ills of excessive individualism. Through this creature, Shelley allegorizes social contract theory's failure to unite individuals into a society. She suggests that individuality is meaningless without a notion of a community and of common cultural heritage. Shelley's unconventional perspective on the social contract reflects her singular status as a woman writer in a philosophical tradition dominated by men, and in a literary tradition in which Mary Wollstonecraft – her absent mother – is the sole female precedent. Shelley criticizes the exclusion of women from the social contract model of society, and seeks to reassert broader circles of domestic and social dependence in place of its individualistic legacy.

¹ References to *Frankenstein* cite Nora Crook's standard edition of the 1818 *Frankenstein*. The 1818 *Frankenstein* is more relevant to the political questions considered in this dissertation than the 1831 version. As Crook observes, the 1818 *Frankenstein* is still preoccupied with the French Revolution; by contrast, the 1831 text deals intensively with Italian liberation, which concerned Shelley from the 1820s ("1831" 5). However, for the purposes of my argument, I have not found significant differences among the two versions. Crook and Anne Mellor see Shelley's major change as being in the 1831 *Frankenstein*'s portrayal of Victor as a victim of circumstances ("1831" 10; "Choosing" 36"). But as I argue later in this chapter, already in the 1818 version Victor often has little control of his destiny. The passages examined in this chapter reveal virtually no textual variations between the two versions.

She pursues these concerns through a complex dialogue with her predecessors, and especially with the writings of Wollstonecraft and Rousseau.

In striving to integrate aspects of Wollstonecraft's and Rousseau's writings into her text, Shelley moves away from the conventional eighteenth- and nineteenth-century model of writing as an individual enterprise. In her introduction to the 1831 *Frankenstein*, she "humbly admit[s]" that "[i]nvention ... does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself" ("Introduction" 178). Julie Carlson comments on Shelley's "approach to remains," whereby "authorship is envisioned neither as individual nor collaborative but instead as collective, as something incorporated" (200, 14). Shelley presents herself as a social being, in dialogue with her creators. In her journal, she emphasizes the gendered aspect of this communal perspective: "Most women I believe wish they had been men – so do not I – change my sex and I do not think my talents would be greater – & I should be like one of these – selfish unkind" (*Journals* 2.487). Shelley ascribes both her talents and her ethical sensibility to her identity as a woman, suggesting that with very few exceptions men abuse their privileged status: "I ... hate a sex who are strong only to oppress – moral only to insult" (488). But Shelley's strategy for opposing patriarchal individualism is surprisingly moderate, given these remarks. She emphasizes her conservative character in contrast to that of her radical family:

with regard to the "good Cause" – the cause of the advancement of freedom and knowledge – of the Rights of Woman &c – I am not a person of opinions. I have said elsewhere that human beings differ greatly in this – some have a passion for reforming the world: others do not cling to particular opinions. That my Parents and Shelley were of the former class, makes me respect it For myself, I

earnestly desire the good and enlightenment of my fellow creatures but I am not for violent extremes. (*Journals* 2.553-54)

Shelley defines her position as one of subversive praxis rather than radical discourse: "I have never written to vindicate the Rights of women, I have ever befriended women when oppressed – at every risk I have defended and supported victims of the social system" (*Journals* 2.557). Shelley thus suggests that she and Wollstonecraft share a similar goal, while designating her own strategy as one of action, rather than polemic.

Over the last thirty years, *Frankenstein* has achieved iconic status, partly due to Shelley's engagement with gender politics. Critics have also acknowledged Shelley's dialogue with Rousseau, mostly in the context of Rousseauvian nature. Anne McWhir and Alan Richardson compare the creature to Émile, a child raised in nature (75; 150). David Marshall, Richardson, Paul Cantor and Nancy Yousef all find allusions to Rousseau's natural man (183; 150; 120; 155). James O'Rourke notes Shelley's profound identification with Rousseau's sense of moral culpability, identifying elements of Rousseau in Victor, the unnatural father ("Nothing" 565; *Sex* 112; see also Dart 2). Others discover aspects of Rousseau in the creature, whose confessions are at the heart of Shelley's novel (Marshall 193; Yousef 155).² Critics have also interpreted the creature through the broader body politic tradition. Thus, Clara Tuite reads him as a metaphor for the newly categorized laboring classes of Malthus's *Essay on Population* (141). Franco Moretti argues that the creature expresses Shelley's anxiety about the growing proletariat

² David Marshall cites Rousseau as being even more important to Shelley than Milton (152). Lawrence Lipking argues that "the influence of Rousseau has penetrated so deeply [into *Frankenstein*] that it seems identical with what Percy Shelley's Preface to the novel calls 'the truth of the elementary principles of human nature'" (327).

Other influences of Rousseau on Shelley have also been considered. See Gregory Dart's discussion of Shelley's engagement with Rousseau's motif of retreat in his autobiographical writings (9-10). Marshall comments on the relationship of the Alpine landscape to *Julie* (183). Christian Bok compares Shelley's Rousseauvian account of the creature's language acquisition to the post-structuralist linguistic theories of Derrida and Kristeva (419, 420-21).

class (87). Glen Brewster understands him as a subversion of the myth of Albion, whereby monstrosity is produced by his constitution of body parts from the poor and the criminal (75-77). Diana Reese ties *Frankenstein's* concern with isolation and the body politic to Shelley's critique of Rousseau, which echoes Louis Althusser's reading of *The Social Contract* (59). While Reese's argument is crucial in establishing a connection between the creature and Rousseau's general will, Reese considers the creature as an individual excluded from the general will, whereas I argue that he is also an incarnation of the general will itself (58).

Thus, virtually all studies of *Frankenstein* acknowledge Godwin and Wollstonecraft's omnipresence. Many also examine Rousseau's influence; but none discuss *Frankenstein's* complex relationships to Wollstonecraft and Rousseau in conjunction. Because of Shelley's radically intertextual approach to writing, I preface my analysis of *Frankenstein* with a detailed consideration of Wollstonecraft's engagement with Rousseau. I begin with Wollstonecraft's more politically moderate texts, and then read the radical *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria (Maria)*. I also focus on Shelley's concern with the broader cultural implications of maternal loss which emerge through her references to Wollstonecraft and Rousseau. I then examine metaphors of individuality and sociability in *Frankenstein*, studying their relationship to the social contract and to gender. A final section examines Shelley's approach to literary and political rhetoric and her references to Hume, Volney, and Smith, whom she criticizes for their common assumption that the individual is a harmonious component of society.

I. Wollstonecraft on Rousseau, Enlightenment Progress

"[O]ne would think that the Creator formed us thus, to prove more decisively that we are social animals – & yet we, as Rousseau says, turning his good to our evil, make it the source of perpetual reprehension." (Shelley, *Letters* 568-69)

Wollstonecraft criticizes Rousseau from two antithetical perspectives. Firstly, she attempts to resolve the inherent conflicts of Rousseau's social theory by endeavoring to read him as a champion of progress, perfectibility and sociability. She rejects aspects of his theory which contradict this model, such as Rousseau's approach to gender that denies women the status of individuals. Wollstonecraft's political theory expresses a basic confidence in Rousseau's broader principles, and attempts to explain his chauvinism in terms of local errors of judgment. But secondly, in her literary texts, Wollstonecraft shifts strategy and reads Rousseau as a direct proponent of patriarchal oppression, an enemy of progress. Here, Wollstonecraft's criticism is unmitigated by any regard for other aspects of his theory. Thus, there are major gaps among Wollstonecraft's political and literary texts in terms of their approaches to Rousseau in particular, and to social critique in general.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman represents Wollstonecraft's attempt to inscribe Rousseau's complex social theory within the more general Enlightenment model of progress. Wollstonecraft endorses Rousseau's theory of a general will, but rejects his emphasis on individuality. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she argues that Rousseau was mistaken in "labour[ing] ... to prove that man was naturally a solitary animal" (*Woman* 30). She aspires to translate the Rousseauvian individual into a naturally sociable entity: "I have endeavored to shew that private duties are never properly fulfilled unless the understanding enlarges the heart; and that public virtue is only an aggregate of

private" (229). As Virginia Sapiro observes, Wollstonecraft envisions "a reciprocal or mutually creating and reinforcing relationship between the 'public' and the 'private.' Private virtue is the foundation of public virtue, but public virtue is also a condition for private virtue, and therefore a major aim of government" (181). Wollstonecraft explains Rousseau's overly individualistic theory of a state of nature as an overreaction to unfortunate, but essentially random circumstances:

Impressed by ... the misery and disorder which pervaded society, and fatigued with jostling against artificial fools, Rousseau became enamoured of solitude, and, being at the same time an optimist, he labours with uncommon eloquence to prove that man was naturally a solitary animal. (*Woman* 30)

Thus classifying Rousseau as "an optimist," Wollstonecraft speculates that "had Rousseau mounted one step higher ... his active mind would have darted forward to contemplate the perfection of man in the establishment of true civilization, instead of taking his ferocious flight back to the night of sensual ignorance" (*Woman* 30, 35). Wollstonecraft misreads Rousseau as a primitivist, and appears affected by Godwin's argument that "Rousseau [was] an advocate of the savage state" (Godwin, *Variants* 326).³ But Rousseau actually posits this presocial past as a hypothetical fantasy, which civilization must overcome with sophisticated mechanisms of socialization.

Like other eighteenth-century readers, Wollstonecraft regards Rousseau's state of nature as too egocentric and too comfortable to have generated progress.⁴ She suggests that instead of the Edenic comfort of the *Second Discourse*, the barren, Scandinavian landscape in which *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and*

³ Wollstonecraft often seems to confuse Rousseau with Godwin, who argues that "perfectibility is one of the most unequivocal characteristics of the human species, so that the political, as well as the intellectual state of man, may be presumed to be in a course of progressive improvement" (Godwin, *Justice* 9). David Spadafora emphasizes the cultural ascendancy of models of progress in eighteenth-century England, which influenced Godwin and Wollstonecraft (17).

⁴ See Nanette le Coat's comments on the popularity of this criticism of the state of nature in Wollstonecraft's times (369).

Denmark (A Short Residence) is set would have been more conducive to progress. She reasons that the presocial condition has to be unhappy in order for people to advance toward civilization: "[t]he world requires ... the hand of man to perfect it," so that "it is physically impossible that he should have remained in Rousseau's golden age of stupidity" (*Residence* 288). Wollstonecraft therefore concludes that "[s]o far from thinking that the primitive inhabitants of the world lived in a southern climate, where Paradise spontaneously arose, I am led to infer ... [that] Man must therefore have been placed in the north" (263). This harsh northern landscape impels people to industry to guarantee their survival.

Responding to her parents' misreadings of Rousseau as an optimist, a primitivist and a communitarian, Shelley observes that Rousseau is less concerned with an idealized future, past or utopian community, than with the inherent conflicts of sociability. In a letter of 1827, Shelley defines the terms of Rousseau's discontent: "one would think that the Creator formed us thus, to prove more decisively that we are social animals – & yet we, as Rousseau says, turning his good to our evil, make it the source of perpetual reprehension" (*Letters* 568-69). Shelley notes a gap in Rousseau's writings between a basic need for society, and a reality of social malaise. Beneath the Enlightenment veneer through which Wollstonecraft and Godwin read Rousseau, Shelley elicits a conflict between the individual and society. Wollstonecraft also responds to this conflict, experiencing it through a predicament of extreme isolation and exclusion which contradicts her aspirations to sociability. In *A Short Residence*, she admits "[h]ow frequently has melancholy and even misanthropy taken possession of me, when the world has disgusted me, and friends have proved unkind. I have then considered myself as a

particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind” (*Residence* 248-49). The topographical register of being "a particle broken off" from "the grand mass" contrasts with Rousseau's state of nature, in which the individual is a complete entity, independent of its subsequent social body. Wollstonecraft suggests that individuals often do not find a place in society, despite their intense need for social realization. She ascribes her own isolation to her status as a woman. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft speaks out against the situation of

Females ... denied all political privileges, and not allowed, as married women, excepting in criminal cases, a civil existence [who] have their attention naturally drawn from the interest of the whole community to that of the minute parts, though the private duty of any member of society must be very imperfectly performed when not connected with the general good. (*Woman* 220)

For Wollstonecraft, Rousseau represents a patriarchal general will which discriminates against women.⁵

II. Wollstonecraft on Rousseau, Gender

"[T]he laws of her country – if women have a country – afford her no protection."
(Wollstonecraft, *Maria* 321)

Wollstonecraft's extensive treatment of Rousseau's approach to gender can be broadly divided between the desire to defend Rousseau, despite his chauvinism (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft's review of *The Confessions*, and *A Short Residence*), and overwhelming anger against a patriarchal society which denies women the status of individuals (*Maria* and *Mary*). In a manner characteristic of the

⁵Despite Wollstonecraft's many divergences from Rousseau's social theory, Barbara Taylor notes "[T]hat Wollstonecraft was a Rousseauist is indisputable" (73). Wollstonecraft moved to revolutionary Paris to join a coterie with a "Rousseauist and sentimental social and political philosophy" (Kelly "Politicizing" 148). She espouses Rousseau's critique of aristocratic decadence and was influenced by his radical vision of equality (Taylor 159, 165).

social contract tradition, Wollstonecraft roughly distributes these attitudes between a more apologetic tendency in her theoretical writings, and a more subversive approach in her literary texts. She suggests that Rousseau's retrograde approach to gender contradicts his theory of progress. But regardless of Rousseau's obvious chauvinism, his general system is not inherently progressive, and is more focused on a subtle formulation of the relationship between the individual and society. If Wollstonecraft mistakes Rousseau for a would-be emissary of progress and – by extension, also of gender equality – Shelley recognizes that Rousseau's thinking is deeply conflicted and fundamentally non-egalitarian.

In her review of *The Confessions* for the *Analytic Review*, Wollstonecraft qualifies her disagreement with Rousseau's approach to gender. She explains Rousseau's exclusion of women as the unwanted by-product of his more general enthusiastic candor and erotic disposition, the very abundance of which causes immoderation and leads him to overemphasize female seductiveness.⁶ Wollstonecraft deems this as indicative of immoderate taste, rather than any more significant political position:

[E]ven his [Rousseau's] most enthusiastic admirers must allow that his imagination was sometimes rampant, and breaking loose from his judgment, sketched some alluring pictures, whose colouring was more natural than chaste It is impossible to peruse his simple descriptions without loving the man in spite of the weaknesses of character that he himself depicts, which never appear to have risen from depravity of heart. (*Analytic* 404)

In the more radical *Maria*, Wollstonecraft analyzes the cultural context of this "weakness of character" (*Analytic* 404). The Rousseauvian Henry Darnford is "[a]ccustomed to submit to every impulse of passion, and never taught, like women, to refrain ... every

⁶ Here Wollstonecraft responds to Rousseau's scandalous reputation for sexual explicitness in *The Confessions*. O'Rourke observes that *The Confessions* is based on the structure of the eighteenth-century French pornographic novel, which would have been recognizable to contemporary readers (*Sex* 18-21).

desire became a torrent that bore down all opposition" (*Maria* 262). In her appraisal of Rousseau, Wollstonecraft defends this tendency to incontinence as a culturally-constructed weakness, and therefore beyond individual control.

Wollstonecraft's defense of Rousseau extends to a discussion of his notorious abandonment of his five children to a foundling hospital, which he presents as the best decision for their future (Rousseau, *Confessions* 299-300). Rousseau subsequently gives this future little further mention, except when commenting that an admirer who wanted to adopt these children was unable to locate them (467). Wollstonecraft explains,

The manner in which he disposed of his children, in the foundling hospital ... nothing could excuse; yet this crime, probably, produced his Emile – and his fellow-creatures may be content with such an expiatory sacrifice; especially when they hear that he felt the sincerest remorse for his conduct, and declared that nature did not intend that J. J. Rousseau should be an unnatural father. (*Analytic* 231)

Instead of holding Rousseau responsible for this and other actions, Wollstonecraft "expiate[s]" them as moments of error for which Rousseau amply compensates with his exuberant literary talent. She thereby asserts *The Confessions* the work of a benign genius, so that "a defence of Rousseau appears to us unnecessary – for surely he speaks to the heart" (*Analytic* 409). As Mary Poovey observes, Wollstonecraft "retreat[s] from the insight to which she was so close in *The Rights of Woman*, the recognition that the individual's situation, his or her position within class, gender, economics and history – really delimits his freedom and virtually defines the 'self'" (109). Instead, Wollstonecraft's portrayal of Rousseau presents abuse on the basis of gender or class as wrong, but also as secondary to Rousseau's great achievements.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft narrows her critique of Rousseau's approach to gender to focus exclusively on his misperception of women as

mindless coquettes. She suggests that instead of empowering all individuals as equal members of society, Rousseau privileges men by objectifying women. The Rousseauvian woman can only gain power through the irrational manipulation of her status as an object: "Educate women like men,' says Rousseau, 'and the more they resemble our sex the less power they will have over us.' This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves" (*Woman* 85). In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the self-fulfilling nature of Rousseau's stereotyping of women as sexual objects: "By allowing women but one way of rising in the world, the fostering the libertinism of men, society makes monsters of them, and their ignoble vices are brought forward as proof of inferiority of intellect" (*Maria* 304). Wollstonecraft suggests that far from being the manipulative coquettes that Rousseau describes in *The Confessions* or *Émile*, women are themselves the victims of male manipulation, which this Rousseauvian rhetoric both sanctions and produces.

Wollstonecraft develops this criticism more extensively in *Maria* than in her articles and political texts. In the preface to *Maria*, she explains that her "main object [is], the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society" (*Maria* 247). Wollstonecraft further emphasizes that "the history ought rather to be considered, as of woman, than of an individual" (247). This history leads Wollstonecraft to the radical insight that women are victims of patriarchal society. She identifies two primary means by which society disempowers and objectifies women. Firstly, patriarchal society operates a nexus of legal and cultural systems which discriminate against women. Describing the workings of the justice system which supports her abusive husband, Maria explains that "[a husband] can rob ...

with impunity, even to waste publicly on a courtesan; and the laws of her country – if women have a country – afford her no protection" (321). In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft also explores the patriarchal cultural infrastructure which oppresses women, categorizing Rousseau within this tradition. But secondly, Wollstonecraft emphasizes that patriarchy subordinates women by severing the bonds which connect mothers and daughters to each other. Wollstonecraft herself does not relate these two mechanisms causally, but they eventually converge in the writings of Shelley.

In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft anatomizes the various operations of patriarchy, incorporating Rousseau within her critique. To seduce Maria, Henry Darnford sends her his personal copy of *Julie*. Maria "read[s] on the margin of an impassioned letter, written in the well-known hand – 'Rousseau alone, the true Prometheus of sentiment, possessed the fire of genius necessary to pourtray the passion, the truth of which goes directly to the heart'" (*Maria* 262). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft uses similar language to criticize Rousseau for "allow[ing] himself to love with sexual fondness. His imagination constantly prepared inflammable fuel for his inflammable senses" (*Woman* 62). Darnford thereby lures Maria with Rousseau's corrupting, "inflammable" materials. To seduce her, he also sends her political pamphlets with

Marginal notes ... containing various observations on the present state of society and government, with a comparative view of the politics of Europe and America. These remarks were written with a degree of generous warmth ... perfectly in unison with Maria's mode of thinking. (*Maria* 258)

Between the lines of these political pamphlets, Maria senses the "warmth" of Darnford's advances. Wollstonecraft later spells out this intent very clearly: "[a] fondness for the sex often gives an appearance of humanity to the behaviour of men ... and they seem to love others, when they are only pursuing their own gratification" (*Maria* 349). Darnford is

less interested in the love of the communal spirit, than in the gratification of his private desires. Mary Jacobus interprets the political function of Wollstonecraft's reference to

Julie:

Beware of sentimentalism, seems to be Wollstonecraft's message; beware especially of the sentimentalist you meet over a book by Rousseau. The romance of transference-lovers, seemingly written on a special page, turns out to be inscribed in the general history of women's oppression. (84)

In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft classifies *Julie* within this more "general history of women's oppression."

Wollstonecraft also analyzes the politics that motivate the patriarchal practice of separating mothers and daughters. Jemima, the character that Wollstonecraft most clearly associates with the wrongs of woman, traces her subaltern status to her mother's death.

Thereupon, she was

[T]hrown into the world without the grand support of life – a mother's affection I was an egg dropped on the sand I was despised from my birth, and denied the chance of obtaining a footing for myself in society. Yes; I had not even the chance of being considered as a fellow-creature[.]
(*Maria* 277)

The mother provides membership within the broader human community. Without her intercession, Jemima is pushed into its margins, finding employment first as a prostitute and then as a mental asylum warden. Maria also loses her mother, but through rejection rather than death. Her mother applies the logic of primogeniture to the deployment of domestic affections, and indulges her brother while neglecting Maria (*Maria* 302). Maria considers death as preferable to this "life without a mother's care!" (356). Wollstonecraft's own life, as infamously recounted by Godwin, involves a similar betrayal by a mother whose "partiality was fixed upon the eldest son, and her system of government relative to Mary, was characterized by considerable rigour" (*Memoirs* 7). Godwin's register of

"government" and "rigour" suggests the dominance of patriarchal values within the family. This pattern recurs in *Mary, A Fiction*, where the protagonist protects her mother from a "tyrannical" husband only to suffer rejection (*Mary* 10). Mary thus comes to mourn the loss of her mother while the latter is still alive: "her mother had often disappointed her, and the apparent partiality she shewed to her brother gave her exquisite pain – produced a kind of habitual melancholy" (11). The trauma of maternal rejection "[becomes] more than a match for self-love," a fatal blow to Mary's self-esteem (11). *Maria* and *Mary* thereby both expose a system of patriarchal oppression, which sanctions the abandonment of children, the abuse and trafficking of women, the shameless exploitation of male privilege, and its justification through Rousseauvian rhetoric.

Shelley on the Wrongs of Rousseau

"Nothing can be more unnatural than his [Rousseau's] natural man. The most characteristic part of man's nature is his affections. The protection he affords to woman – the cares required by children." (Shelley, *Lives* 337)

Unlike Wollstonecraft, who is cautious about criticizing Rousseau in her theoretical writings, Shelley's encyclopedia entry on "Rousseau" for Lardner's *French Lives* is directly confrontational and connects patriarchy to the abnegation of maternal ties.⁷ Shelley spells-out the full implications of Wollstonecraft's sometimes veiled references to Rousseauvian/ Promethean sentiment. She connects Rousseau's theory of a state of nature to early maternal loss, suggesting that Rousseau excludes the typical circumstances of gestation and maternal dependence, by substituting them with a

⁷ Shelley's discussion of Rousseau is based largely on Victor-Donatien Musset-Pathay's survey of his major works (*Lives* xix). In his *Histoire de la vie et des ouvrages de J.-J. Rousseau*, Musset-Pathay closely summarizes Rousseau's *Confessions* and his narrative of the state of nature and the formation of a social contract (365-72, 414-15).

narrative of independence. In Rousseau's theory, humans do not instinctively care for each other and only value their self-preservation. They reproduce through "blind inclination This need satisfied, the two sexes no longer recognized each other, and even the child no longer meant anything to his mother as soon as he could do without her" (Rousseau, *Inequality* 43). Shelley criticizes Rousseau's view "that entire independence, even of natural duties, was the state congenial to man" (*Lives* 366). She warns readers not to be dazzled by Rousseau's state of nature, as "nothing can be more unnatural than his natural man. The most characteristic part of man's nature is his affections. The protection he affords to woman – the cares required by children" (337). As O'Rourke comments, Shelley recognizes "that Rousseau's adoption of the primitivist thesis of the solitary 'natural man' is simply a rationalization of his abandonment of his children, an expression of paternal guilt" (100). Shelley takes Rousseau's abandonment of his children as sad proof that "a father is not to be trusted for natural instincts towards his offspring" (*Lives* 334). She elicits the suppressed narrative behind Rousseau's laconic reference to this abandonment, explaining that "[t]he poor children in all probability died in their infancy" (335). Shelley speculates that "these children might have clustered around him in his days of desertion, have cheered his house with smiles, and been a help and support in his age. He would not have felt friendless" (335). Rousseau's individualism abnegates these vital ties, which Shelley then seeks to resurrect through this uncharacteristic fantasy of a domesticated Rousseau.

Shelley's approach to domesticity is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, there are no happy families in *Frankenstein*. Frances Ferguson observes that "[i]f the monster longs for companionship, Victor Frankenstein does bequeath on him one rare – and

sublime – privilege: being alone" (112). Unlike Victor and Felix, who suffer from the "domestic overextension" produced by their onerous duties as sons, brothers, fiancés and citizens, the creature remains gloriously unattached (Ferguson 111). But on the other hand, Shelley gestures toward the family as a potential alternative to individualism. Greg Kucich notes that Shelley's work as a biographer, which occupied a significant portion of her career, foregrounds "[t]he emotional ties of friendship, romantic love, and especially family connections" that are omitted from traditional patriarchal historiography ("Reengendering" 206). Shelley criticizes "destructive types of egotism associated with masculine Romantic ideology" such as "Rousseau's attempt to rationalize his behavior as part of a system of natural sublimity," or his vision of man as an isolated entity (Kucich, "Reengendering" 210, 211). Shelley's essay on Madame d'Houdetôt for Leigh Hunt's *The Liberal* demonstrates her attempt to integrate women's history into individualist, patriarchal historiography. Shelley suggests that Madame d'Houdetôt should be valued, not merely for her connection to Rousseau, but also as a discrete individual in her own right: "[i]t is on Rousseau's account that we feel curious concerning the character of Madame d'Houtetôt;" but we can also "become interested on her own account ... declaring her worthy for her own sake of that attention, which we first bestowed on her for another's" ("d'Houdetôt" 118). Shelley wants to reclaim women's status as individuals from Rousseau's theory, and to explore their potential contribution to society independently of men.

**Shelley on Wollstonecraft:
Maternal Absence and Literary Presence**

"I cost my mother her life; and my birth was the first of my misfortunes[.]"
(Rousseau, *Confessions* 7)

Shelley pursues her goal of forming an alternative to patriarchal individualism by rewriting Wollstonecraft's texts and thus extending their critique of patriarchal values. She reads Maria's dedication to her absent daughter to "shield her from the misery, the tyranny, her mother knew not how to avoid" as a direct legacy for herself from her absent mother (*Maria* 255). *Frankenstein*'s subtitle, "The Modern Prometheus," alludes to the classical myth of Prometheus, but also to Henry Darnford's ironic praise of Rousseau as "the true Prometheus of sentiment," accolades which Darnford carefully words to seduce Maria (262). *Frankenstein* thus incorporates Wollstonecraft's allusions to Rousseau in *Maria*, and Wollstonecraft's discussions of Rousseau in her theoretical texts. Shelley argues against *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, suggesting that Rousseau's oppression of women is not a marginal error, but a cardinal flaw. She also objects to Wollstonecraft's position in *Maria* that the subjugation of women reflects a specific injustice to women. Instead, Shelley argues that it indicates a basic lack of empathy in human society. Shelley thereby forms a critique of Wollstonecraft's complicity with elements of Rousseau's social contract theory, developing her own discrete objections to this tradition.

But on an altogether different level, Shelley's project of rewriting Wollstonecraft's texts also expresses her more general preoccupation with Wollstonecraft's biographical absence. By contrast to this complex, indirect relationship to Wollstonecraft, Shelley "respectfully inscribe[s]" *Frankenstein* to "William Godwin, Author of Political Justice,

Caleb Williams &c" on the novel's title page (*Frankenstein* 5). Charles Robinson notes Shelley's omission of direct references to Wollstonecraft's life and works from *Frankenstein*, speculating that Shelley may have been protecting her mother's damaged reputation (132-33). But Shelley's unwillingness openly to credit Wollstonecraft's omnipresence in *Frankenstein*, as also her implied criticisms of Wollstonecraft's political theory and her engagements with Wollstonecraft's literary texts, primarily express her preoccupation with Wollstonecraft's pervasive absence.⁸ Shelley thus dates Walton's expedition to the North Pole from her time of conception to Wollstonecraft's death eleven days after her birth (Macdonald *Frankenstein* 49 N.1). She circumscribes *Frankenstein* within the short duration of her relationship with her mother.

Shelley's engagement with maternal loss in *Frankenstein* also operates on a thematic level. Through Victor's neglect of his creature and the creature's revenge, Shelley criticizes a society which abnegates mothers. Victor commits the Rousseauvian crime, censured by Shelley in her *French Lives*, of abandoning his "first duty ... to render those to whom we give birth wise, virtuous and happy, as far as in us lies. Rousseau failed in this, – can we wonder that his after course was replete with sorrows?" (*Lives* 335). This neglect of duty is a response to his mother's sudden death from scarlet fever. Victor's bereavement and subsequent creation echo Rousseau's opening of *The Confessions*, where he asserts "I cost my mother her life; and my birth was the first of my misfortunes" (*Confessions* 7). Like Rousseau, Victor traces his misfortunes to the primal trauma of maternal loss. Following his mother's death, he embarks on the program of

⁸ See Elizabeth Bronfen (34-35), Carlson (3), Gary Kelly ("Politicizing" 154), Poovey (125), and Robinson (128), among many others for discussions of Shelley's enduring preoccupation with Wollstonecraft's death. Anne Mellor also notes this dynamic, whereby "[Shelley] rebirth[s] her dead mother's text in the body of her own" (421).

intense study that enables him successfully to forget the existence of his entire family for the next two years. The creature is born of "an enthusiastic frenzy" of repressed grief (*Frankenstein* 127).

Walton's arctic expedition reflects a similar response to parental loss. He is first drawn to the north by arctic travel narratives which he reads after his parents' deaths (*Frankenstein* 11). Eventually, these inspire him "[to] embark in a sea-faring life," in contravention of his "father's dying injunction." Walton's self-imposed isolation defies his father's last request and removes him a great distance from his home. His expedition echoes *A Short Residence's* barren glacial landscape and travelogue form. Shelley describes the northern tundra as an inhospitable, unsustaining environment. When Walton first discovers Victor en route to the North Pole, the latter is "nearly frozen, and his body dreadfully emaciated" (17). Similarly, in the frozen Alps, "[a] great fall of snow" drives the creature to near starvation (78). Through this harsh portrayal of the north, Shelley both criticizes her mother's theory of progress, while also commemorating her absence by reproducing Wollstonecraft's text.

Walton expresses homesickness in his letters to his sister Margaret Saville, beseeching her to "[c]ontinue to write to me by every opportunity: I may receive your letters (though the chance is very doubtful) on some occasions when I need them most to support my spirits" (*Frankenstein* 14-15). But as he predicts, these letters never arrive. Similarly, when he finally resolves to return home, Shelley neither represents nor confirms this return in her text. Home remains an absent space, never heard from and never seen. As Gay Clifford explains, Walton "writ[es] from somewhere immeasurably remote to someone we never see and who is never characterized " (614). Gayatri Spivak

also comments on the role of this "framing woman in the book who is neither tangential, nor encircled, nor yet encircling She is the occasion, though not the protagonist, of the novel. She is the feminine *subject*, rather than the female individualist" ("Three" 259).

The tangible absence of this "feminine *subject*" motivates Walton and Victor's individualistic projects, echoing Shelley's own correspondence with the texts of the absent Wollstonecraft.

Several critics analyze Victor's creature as an embodiment of Shelley's concern with maternal loss. Yousef reads him as "expos[ing] the monstrosity of leaving out the role of infancy, childhood, and the network of dependence and relation in the formation of human persons" (167). She explores this hypothesis through a comparison of the creature's education to Lockean epistemology (152-64). *Frankenstein* thus "brings to light ... the narrowness of experience imagined in such texts as Locke's *Essay [Concerning Human Understanding]*, particularly in their vision of the course of human development" (169). Gayatri Spivak also notes that the creature does not have "a determinable childhood" ("Three" 255). From a different perspective, but with a similar vision of the monster as diverging from the course of normal development, Marshall Brown notes his lack of an adult identity and his infantile desire for a playmate (160, 153). Thus, from a variety of approaches, Yousef, Spivak and Brown all view the creature as emblematic of a social theory that imagines human beings as originally unencumbered by social relations, needs or women.

Victor engenders a being that is his mother's diametric opposite – her concrete abnegation. If Caroline Beaufort has "dark eyes, fringed by deep lashes, and ... lovely lips," the creature has "watery eyes, that seemed of the same colour as the dun white

sockets in which they were set" and "straight black lips" (*Frankenstein* 107, 40). Shortly after the creature's birth, Victor has a nightmare which suggests the creature's close relationship to Caroline:

I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of flannel. (*Frankenstein* 40)

Elizabeth, here a stand-in for Caroline, devolves into the creature. Her lips "livid with the hue of death" resemble his "straight black lips." The image of "imprint[ing]" a kiss of death upon these lips is an inversion of Victor's animation of the creature. "[L]ivid" denotes death, but is a reverse-rhyme of "live," suggesting Shelley's view of their interchangeability. The "worms crawling in the folds of flannel" recall the worms that infest the corpses which constitute him.

The creature's thematic reproduction of maternal loss also operates on an intertextual level. Shelley bases the creature on Jemima, a character raised without maternal agency. Supernaturalism is figurative in Wollstonecraft's account of Jemima "as a creature of another species," which is "cut off from human converse ... a ghost among the living" (*Maria* 278, 283). It becomes actual in Shelley's portrayal of the creature as a genuine monster. Thus, Jemima describes herself as "[c]onfined then in a dark hovel ... a little old woman, or a hag shrivelling into nothing. The furrows of reflection and care contracted the youthful cheek, and gave a sort of supernatural wildness to the ever watchful eye" (274-75). These figures materialize into an actual "supernatural wildness" in the creature, who occupies a genuine "dark hovel" adjacent to the De Lacey cottage. Walton describes him as "unearthly in his ugliness" (*Frankenstein* 167). In her anger

against the society that has abused her, Jemima remains mostly passive. She must overcome "neglect ... to exist, to learn to curse existence, [her countenance grew ferocious as she spoke]" (*Maria* 274). Shelley unleashes this pent-up rage through the creature's destructive actions and horrific murders. The creature's cadaveric appearance also reproduces maternal loss. He is "concealed by long locks of ragged hair; but one vast hand was extended, in colour and apparent texture like that of a mummy Never did I behold a vision so horrible as his face" (*Frankenstein* 166-67). Jacobus notes that "mummy," which describes the creature's body, is also a pun on "mother" – a reference to the dead Wollstonecraft (79). The creature's mummified desiccated flesh echoes the hag-like "shrivel[ed]" and "furrow[ed]" skin of Jemima in her mother's last novel (*Maria* 274-75). If Victor's two years of frenzied creation fail to suppress the trauma of his mother's death, by contrast, Shelley's text re-embodies this trauma with a vengeance.

Frankenstein expresses an abject sensibility shaped by maternal loss. In her journals, Shelley identifies with the experience of Victor's abject creature, echoing his sense of being "a poor, helpless, miserable wretch" (*Frankenstein* 77).⁹ Shelley thus describes herself as "poverty stricken – deformed squinting lame – bald – all every thing – it is quite just that I should be ejected from the sight of man – what a pity that they don't put an end to me at once" (*Journals* 2.489). Her focus on abjection undermines Rousseau's model of asocial independence. Julia Kristeva analyzes the abject as "preserv[ing] what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body" (10). Kristeva's account of origins provides an alternative to the patriarchal narrative of independence,

⁹ For the same reasons, Shelley also identifies with Jemima. Jemima's mother's death nine days after her birth uncannily anticipates Wollstonecraft's own death eleven days after Shelley's birth (*Maria* 274).

and involves an experience of the mother's "inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its [the abject's] own being" (Kristeva 5).¹⁰ Beneath Rousseau's account of originary individuality, Shelley elicits a concurrent narrative of dependence and loss.

Marie Mulvey-Roberts comments on the proximity of life and putrefaction in Shelley's imagination, a direct legacy of Wollstonecraft's death from puerperal fever eleven days after her birth: "In Shelley's work we find a ... paradox: that which gives life also kills" (199). Following this paradoxical logic, giving birth means taking life; parenting is infanticide, and birth is matricide. Conversely, the dead can also come back to life. Suggesting a similar capacity to reverse death, Shelley's journal of 1815 imagines the revival of her recently deceased daughter:

Dream that my little baby came to life again – that it had only been cold & that we rubbed it by the fire & it lived – I awake & find no baby – I think about the little thing all day – not in good spirits. (*Journals* 1.70)

The following day, Shelley reflects on the painful transition back from dream to reality:

"Dream again about my baby – [? _____] work after breakfast a little while" (*Journals* 1.71). In this entry, writing performs a function comparable to dream or fantasy in its attempt to overcome loss. Thus, Shelley is able to replace "awake & find no baby" with "work after breakfast a little while." On multiple levels, she labors to translate maternal absence into literary presence. Biographically, Shelley engages in her mother's absence; intertextually, she rewrites *Maria* and *A Short Residence*; and thematically, Shelley describes characters (Walton and Victor), who are concerned with displacing the trauma of maternal loss via work and creation.

¹⁰ Kristeva formulates her argument as an alternative to the dominant Freudian model of oedipal conflict, which reflects patriarchal values. Rousseau's narrative of the state of nature is a pre-Freudian account of development which similarly abnegates the mother.

Victor's creation of the monster reflects a similar fascination with the moment when life and death, work and loss, desire and revulsion, cross paths:

I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life; I saw how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain. I paused, examining and analysing all the minutiae of causation, as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life[.] (*Frankenstein* 35-36)

In the charnel-houses, Victor becomes fixated with “how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain,” using these worm-eaten organs to construct his creature. The figure of antimetabole in “the change from life to death, and death to life” pinpoints Victor's fascination with the actual moment of transition. But when the creature finally comes to life, Victor's vision shifts suddenly to squeamish revulsion: “I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body.... [N]ow that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (*Frankenstein* 40). Victor's creation inspires horror because it is unable to hide its origins in death and loss.

As befits a being brought to life in denial of the female body, the creature is male. He senses that he is constituted by maternal lack and laments “I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion” (*Frankenstein* 169). In this complaint, Shelley echoes Wollstonecraft's *Maria*, which suggests that patriarchy operates through the suppression of the maternal bond. But if Wollstonecraft constructs *Maria* in the feminine voice, Shelley implies that this first-person perspective is impossible because individualism excludes women. *Frankenstein*'s major speakers – Walton, Victor and the creature – are male; the women are either subjugated, or forcibly silenced. Safie speaks a foreign language, and Justine Moritz is silenced and murdered by a court of law. Gerhard Joseph observes that Elizabeth and Caroline's angelic femininity “is, in short, one of the earliest

[instances] of the Angel in the House, the staple of Victorian woman-worship to come," which imagines women as objects of male desire (27). Shelley is no exception to the female characters which she creates. Her text is bound up with Wollstonecraft's, which are invested in those of Rousseau. Nora Crook notes that Margaret Walton Saville shares Shelley's initials, suggesting that Shelley identifies herself with this voiceless narrative presence (10 N. a). Thus, although Jemima receives a voice and a significant portion of *Maria's* narrative, Shelley suggests that individualism relies on the silencing of major groups of its subjects.

I. Excluded Creatures and Political Metaphor, The Male Creature

"I am ... affrighted and confounded with that forelorn solitude, in which I am plac'd in my philosophy, and fancy myself some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expell'd all human commerce, and left utterly abandon'd and disconsolate." (Hume, *Treatise* 264)

Through the creature's misguided birth and catastrophic progress, Shelley exposes the shortcomings of a culture of individualism. Victor ambitiously seeks to create "[a] new species [which] would bless me as its creator and source" (*Frankenstein* 37). But the male and female creatures in *Frankenstein* are both extreme cases that demonstrate that communities, societies and species must share a more significant common denominator in order to function. In this section, I study the constitution of the male creature, which I will contrast to the abortion of his female partner in the next section. I thereby examine the exclusions that maintain the social contract. Shelley constructs the male creature as a grotesque parody of the general will, which lacks internal cohesion and cannot protect its members. He is pieced and sewn together from diverse bodies which acquire a unified

existence, constituting an allegory of a failed and monstrous social body. Through this allegory, Shelley questions the Enlightenment model of society as a sympathetic congregation of individuals, and draws attention to a gap between political theory and the cruel reality of actual societies.

Diana Reese observes that the creature represents the violence of Rousseau's general will, which disavows "the 'private sphere' of female nonsubjects, slaves, and servants," the others which Enlightenment individualism must exclude (58). This otherness becomes most apparent in the creature's physical appearance. Michael Prince argues that in the eighteenth century, aesthetic values represented broader normative injunctions about values which unite individuals into a community (208). The social contract relies on qualities of commonality and kinship, which Shelley explores through aesthetic criteria. She therefore contrasts the unsightly creature with the exceptionally gorgeous humans in the novel. The creature is starkly different to the "lovely creatures" of the De Lacey household (*Frankenstein* 82). Thus, he "admir[es] the perfect forms of ... [his] cottagers – their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool" (85). Neither is he of a company with the Frankensteins; Elizabeth is "the most beautiful child," William Frankenstein is also a "beautiful child," and Caroline "a most lovely woman" (23, 106, 107). Even the emaciated Victor immediately draws Walton's attention as "so attractive" (18). Good looks guarantee membership in the human community, inspiring bonds of affection. Colene Bentley notes that both the creature and Safie "are foreigners who arrive unexpectedly at the cottager's door hoping to gain access to their small society" (335). The "wondrously fair" Safie is easily incorporated, but the unsightly creature encounters

rejection (*Frankenstein* 87). Similarly, Elizabeth and Justine are welcomed into the Frankenstein household, whereas the creature is excluded. Bentley emphasizes the extent to which "representative communities in *Frankenstein* are family units; however, these household units are not chiefly organic configurations, but function instead as surprisingly permeable entities that take in and expel non-kindred members" (334). The creature's eloquent narrative appeals to the reader's empathy, emphasizing a profound disjunction between his apparently hideous appearance and his fine sensibility. Victor tries to write off the creature's rhetoric as manipulation, so that "as if possessed of magic powers, the monster blinded me to his real intentions" (*Frankenstein* 146-47). But whereas the reader is encouraged to doubt Victor's reliability in such crucial blunders as his failure to heed the creature's threat "*I shall be with you on your wedding-night*," the creature's suffering inspires empathy, even at times in the skeptical Victor himself (146).

Through her sympathetic portrayal of the creature, Shelley suggests the extreme injustice of his ostracism. The creature explains that his "heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy," but is "wrenched by misery to vice and hatred" by Victor's neglect (*Frankenstein* 167). His first days in the forest near Ingolstadt read as a sad parody of Rousseau's natural man: "I lay by the side of the brook resting from my fatigue, until I felt tormented by hunger and thirst I ate some berries which I found hanging on the trees, or lying on the ground. I slaked my thirst at the brook; and then laying down, was overcome by sleep" (76).¹¹ By contrast, Rousseau describes natural man as happy in his isolation: "satisfying his hunger under an oak, quenching his thirst at the first Stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that furnished his meal, and therewith his needs are satisfied" (*Inequality* 20). Through this and other intertextual

¹¹ See also Yousef, who notes Shelley's critique of Rousseau's state of nature (155).

allusions, Shelley forms a critique of Rousseau's individualistic social theory. The creature, a social being in the most literal sense of the term, is shunned by society. He retaliates accordingly, by sabotaging Victor's closest ties.

II. Excluded Creatures and Political Metaphor, The Female Creature

"At one time the moon, which had been less clear, was suddenly overspread by a thick cloud, and I took advantage of the moment of darkness, and cast my basket into the sea; I listened to the gurgling sound as it sunk[.]" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 132)

The cultural exclusions which sustain individualistic societies emerge most clearly in Victor's formation and subsequent destruction of the female creature. The male creature evolves spontaneously through Victor's exposure to the works of Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus. In this phase, Victor is driven by delusions of grandeur, whereby he anticipates being the "creator and source" of "[a] new species" (*Frankenstein* 37). These aspirations echo Shelley's account of Rousseau's attempt to reinvent the origins of human history in his political writings. Rousseau is the victim of a "quality ... [that] causes him to fancy himself the centre, as it were, of the universe" (*Lives* 320). This leads Rousseau "[to] penetrate deeply into the secret springs of human actions" (330). Similarly, Victor "pursue[s] nature to her hiding places" to "[discover] the causes of ... life" (*Frankenstein* 37, 35). Rousseau is driven to suicidal isolation "till his mind became diseased" (*Lives* 320); Victor loses his loved ones, his sanity and finally his life.¹²

¹² In her criticism of these antisocial ambitions, Shelley is influenced by Baron D'Holbach's *System of Nature*, which she read prior to writing *Frankenstein* (*Journals* 2.652). Holbach, a virulent critic of Rousseau, criticizes solitary enterprise, the quest for innovation and the state of nature. He suggests that people cannot subsist in isolation, and need to seek out each other's help: "this impossibility which each man finds in an isolated state, when left to himself, when unassociated with his fellow men, to labour

Victor's sobering knowledge of the fruit of his Promethean labors makes the female creature's completion necessarily much harder than that of the male creature. Unlike the misguided frenzy which catalyzes the male creature's formation, Victor produces the female creature "in cold blood," with his eyes wide open to the outcome (*Frankenstein* 127). If Victor had originally desired to create a new species, he now becomes horrified by the tangible possibility that this may actually happen. He abhors the prospect of an independent female creature, with a mind and passions of her own, and with offspring and an autonomous existence in "the vast wilds of South America" (109). Victor reflects that she "in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might rebel against a compact made before her creation," and turn "to the superior beauty of man" (128). The female creature may thereby refuse to comply with the Rousseauvian male creature's rules and violate a patriarchal social contract made before her birth. In response to these anxieties, Victor seeks to reassert his male supremacy.

Victor's need for a discrete methodology for forming the female creature suggests her profound difference. He therefore "[finds] that I could not compose a female without again devoting several months to profound study and laborious disquisition. I had heard

efficaciously to his own welfare ... places him in the happy situation of associating with his like" (114). Shelley's account of Victor echoes Holbach's criticism of ambition:

[M]an is bound to this universal Nature; it is by his perception he must penetrate her secrets; it is from his senses he must draw experience of her laws. Therefore, whenever he neglects to acquire experience or quits its path, he stumbles into an abyss; his imagination leads him astray. (22)

Victor penetrates nature's secrets and is led astray by his imagination. He assembles his creature in a state of extreme isolation as a radically individualistic enterprise, asserting that "[i]n other studies you go as far as others have gone before you ... but in a scientific pursuit there is continual food for discovery and wonder" (*Frankenstein* 24). Victor aspires to form an entirely novel variety of life that "would bless me as its creator and source" (37). Yet when this plan reaches fruition with the creature's request for a mate, Victor recants. Shelley's critique of this botched experiment in social invention is shaped by Holbach's view that creation must pertain to empirical circumstances and not displace the phenomenal world. Shelley is influenced by Holbach's notion that "Man, at his birth, brings with him into the world nothing but the necessity of conserving himself, of rendering his existence happy: instruction, example, the customs of the world, present him with the means ... of achieving it" (*System* 137). The creature is thus born morally benign but is moved to vice by his circumstances. He explains that neglect renders "the fallen angel ... a malignant devil" (*Frankenstein* 169).

of some discoveries having been made by an English philosopher, the knowledge of which was material to my success" (*Frankenstein* 115). Victor departs from Rousseau's native Geneva, seeking a discrete body of knowledge in England and eventually arrives in Scotland (125). This change of geographical focus suggests a move away from Rousseauvian individualism, which is associated with Geneva, and toward the Scottish Enlightenment, with its greater emphasis on theories of sympathy. But Shelley provides scant textual evidence of these actual differences of methodologies beyond this shift of locales. In Scotland, Victor finds ample resources "[to] finish my work in solitude" (126). A tendency to procrastination notwithstanding, he seems to encounter no further technical difficulties and almost completes the female creature (128).

But this project terminates abruptly in cathartic abortion. In destroying the female creature, Victor performs the rape which he imagines she may inflict upon him: "trembling with passion, [I] tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged" (*Frankenstein* 129). Spivak notes the gap between Victor's perception of the female creature as living and powerful, and her actual constitution from inanimate corpses: "The (il)logic of the metaphor bestows on her a prior existence which Frankenstein aborts, rather than an anterior death which he reembodies" ("Three" 255). Through a reverse logic, Victor perceives her as alive, powerful and threatening, whereas she is really dead, powerless and victimized. Spivak argues that postcolonial subjects and women "have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" ("Subaltern" 76). The reader is only privy to "[t]he remains of the half-

finished creature" (*Frankenstein* 132). These nonetheless indicate a subaltern subjectivity, which nears realization, but must then be silenced.

Shelley sharply contrasts this female creature's subaltern status with the male characters in the novel. She juxtaposes Victor's powerful scientific discourse with the female creature's silenced voice. This female creature cannot argue against the system that produces her, or counteract the lurid stereotypes which Victor projects onto her and then seeks to efface. In this regard, she is profoundly different to the articulate and invincible male creature. The reader of *Frankenstein* is left with the "task of measuring silences," which Spivak proposes as the only means of representing the subaltern voice ("Subaltern" 82). When Victor discards the female creature's remains, he hears the "gurgling sound" of oxygen escaping into the ocean (*Frankenstein* 132). Shelley leaves the source of this escaping air poignantly and deliberately vague; the gurgling may simply be air trapped in the folds of the creature's clothing, but is also the closest that this subaltern voice comes to articulation.

Shelley's judgment about the female creature's destruction is unmistakable, and indicates a broader criticism of patriarchal culture's failure to allow women the status of individuals. When setting "horror and hatred" aside, Victor recognizes that "the justice due both to him [the creature] and my fellow creatures demanded of me that I should comply with his request" and form the female creature (*Frankenstein* 110). On destroying her, Victor violates his duty and "[feels] as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being" (132). When Victor is acquitted of murdering Clerval, a passer by comments on Victor's "bad conscience" (141). He then reflects, "yes, surely I had one. William, Justine, and Clerval, had died." The recently destroyed female creature is absent from this

list, but her murder seals Victor's guilt and the creature's resolve to destroy him. If the creature cannot form a new social contract with his chosen partner in "the vast wilds of South America," then he will destroy Victor's own marital contract with Elizabeth (109). Shelley parallels the creature's failed attempt to form a society in the new world with Victor's doomed marriage, suggesting that Rousseau's values of individualism are socially and domestically destructive.

III. Excluded Creatures and Political Metaphor, Social Contract Allegory

"Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole." (Rousseau, *Contract* 139)

Shelley constructs the creature as an ostracized individual will which society must exclude, but also an allegory of the general will itself, which is monstrously flawed by its reliance on these exclusions. Much like the general will, Victor's collective being immediately presents problems of cohesiveness. When Victor creates his monster, he encounters difficulty structuring the relations between the creature's various features: "Although I possessed the capacity of bestowing animation, yet to prepare a frame for the reception of it, with its intricacies of fibres, muscles, and veins, still remained a work of inconceivable difficulty and labour" (*Frankenstein* 36-37). Victor complains of his "eyeballs ... starting from their sockets in attending to the details of my employment" (38). Consequently, he resorts to enlargement: "As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed, I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature" (37). The creature evolves into a "filthy mass" of poorly-related elements (110). He later recalls the moment when he first emerges from disparate

individuals into a corporate being: "Before, dark and opaque bodies had surrounded me ... but I now found that I could wander at liberty" (76).¹³ His oversized body magnifies the jarring incompatibility of his parts: "His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes" (39-40). The effect of horror is produced by the creature's lack of coherence – by the strains among his various members. Individually, the parts may be beautiful; as a collective enterprise they come into "horrid contrast." The disparity of the creature's body parts is paralleled by inner disunity. At times both murderous and loving, the creature's will is as unstable as Rousseau's general will. The creature thus represents a Rousseauvian ambivalence about sociability. On the one hand, those who have it long to be rid of it. On the other hand, those that do not persistently seek it out. Through this irony, Shelley rejects the notion that a society can be formed by congregating previously isolated individuals.

Shelley does not resolve major questions about the creature's allegorical status. If the creature is a mini-society, what would this make his relationship with the female creature? Would she too be a mini-society, or would they form one together? Shelley posits the contradictions of Rousseau's theory – its reliance on such ambiguities – as its main attraction: "Human nature is in general fond of riddles. We delight to unravel a

¹³ "[D]ark and opaque bodies" is a synaesthetic metaphor which combines visual and tactile sensation. It describes external objects that impede the creature's attempts to move, reflecting the creature's initial difficulty adequately processing visual data. This account of the creature's awakening sensory-motor experience echoes Condillac's *Treatise on the Sensations*, which Shelley read in 1819 (*Journals* 1. 287, 288 N. 6). Condillac describes a "statue" – an artificial man – coming into consciousness through his senses. Sight is traditionally associated with the understanding. But Condillac presents tactility as more primary to its emergence: "I open my eyes to light and I only see at first a luminous and colored cloud. I touch, I advance, I touch again: a fog gradually clears before my eyes. Touch decomposes the light, as it were; it separates the colors" (Condillac 334). The statue uses his hands to grope and distinguish himself from others (233).

knotty point It is for this reason, in a great measure, that so many books have been written about Rousseau" (Shelley, "d'Houdetôt" 117). In this passage, Shelley also echoes Godwin's argument that

He who spends his life among books, must be expected to contract something of the manner of his constant companions. He who would disentangle a *knotty point*, or elucidate a grave question of taste, morals, or politics, must discourse to some degree in the way of dissertation, or he would discourse in vain. (Godwin, *Fleetwood* 222, emphasis added)

Shelley therefore cites Godwin's comments on literary influence, tying them more explicitly to Rousseau's profound and formative impact on her father's work. In the introduction to *Julie*, Rousseau emphasizes his reliance on conflict: "You want people always to be consistent; I doubt that is possible for man; but what is possible is for him always to be true; that is what I mean to try to be" (*Julie* 20). Lawrence Lipking posits Rousseau's tolerance of ambiguity as his main influence on *Frankenstein*: "Rousseau does not make us feel good; he passes on his neuroses, and forces readers, right up to the present, to see that the questions he raises have not been resolved" (330). Sara Guyer suggests that Shelley inherits Rousseau's concern with conflict. This produces "an exceptionally nonredemptive rhetoric [R]omanticism's redemptive efforts have been construed negatively (as violent and blind) or positively (as the source of the imagination and self-consciousness)" (21). Instead, Guyer argues that the Romantic text, of which *Frankenstein* is a prototype, rejects the certitude associated with negation and affirmation.

Languages of Paradox

“Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling; but I learned that there was but one means ... and that was death.”
(Shelley, *Frankenstein* 90)

Brought up in the shadow of Godwin's scandalous *Memoirs*, Shelley inherits an empiricist ambivalence about rhetoric. In *Frankenstein*, language functions as a marker of alienation and murder. Victor is wary about the equivocal nature of language. He requests to see Walton's notes "and then himself corrected and augmented them in many places'Since you have preserved my narration,' he said, 'I would not that a mutilated one should go down to posterity'" (*Frankenstein* 160). Like Shelley's text, which consists of allusions to myriad literary sources, the creature's body has a palimpsestic quality. His “wrinkled” and “yellow skin” appears to have the texture of parchment (*Frankenstein* 39). The creature is a textual entity, assembled from the writings of Agrippa, Magnus and Paracelsus. And as a textual being, he is a naturally prolific reader, assimilating *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Lives*, Goethe's *Sorrows of Werter* and Constantin de Volney's *Ruins* (95, 89). But the creature soon perceives an arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified: “the words they uttered, not having any apparent connexion with visible objects, I was unable to discover any clue by which I could unravel the mystery of their reference” (83). Language condemns the creature to a fragmented existence, from which death is the only reprieve. He reflects, “[o]f what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling; but I learned that there was but one means ... and that was death” (90). He takes revenge in textual form, leaving his “mark” on the bodies of Clerval and Elizabeth, and also providing Victor with “marks in writing on the barks

of the trees, or cut in stone, that guided me, and instigated my fury” (135, 150, 156). He brings Felix and Safie's letters to Victor as proof of the veracity of his tale (92). Victor in turn shows these letters to Walton as evidence of his own narrative (160).

Shelley extends this skepticism about language to incorporate empiricist political theorists. She read Hume's *History of England*, his "Treatise on the Passions," and his *Essays and Treatises on Several Topics*, in which Hume posits the state as an extension of the family (Shelley, *Journals* 2.654; Hume, *Essays* 35). Shelley is influenced by his values, by his style, and by his theory of induction.¹⁴ Monique Morgan finds references to Humean induction in the creature's narrative (par. 3). She argues that Shelley appears familiar with Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, noting that the creature applies Hume's methodology in his manner of learning (par.4). David Womersley conjectures that Percy probably read the *Treatise of Human Nature*, which would have thus become accessible to Shelley (165). Shelley also appears to be influenced by Hume's account of himself as a "strange uncouth monster, who not able to mingle and unite in society, has been expell'd [from] all human commerce, and left utterly abandon'd and disconsolate" in her construction of the creature (*Treatise* 264). Her skepticism toward figurative language echoes Hume's own argument in favor of a firm divide between fact and fiction. Hume suggests that literature exists to prevent the catastrophe of putting social theory into practice ("Original Contract" 236). The state of nature is "a philosophical fiction, which never had, and never cou'd have any reality" (Hume, *Treatise* 493). Where "philosophers may have been bewilder'd in those speculations, poets have been guided more infallibly," because they recognize the "golden age" for what it is – a mere fiction (494, 493).

¹⁴ See also Caldwell's discussion of the influence of Hume's notion of sympathy on Romanticism and on *Frankenstein* (264-65).

Hume argues that literature distorts objective fact and is therefore inferior to history, reason and philosophy (*Treatise* 97, xvii). But he also regards it as a necessary cognitive tool for processing an otherwise chaotic reality (237). Womersley finds echoes of Hume's warning to distinguish between literature and reality in the creature's misreading of *Paradise Lost* as an actual, rather than a literary, account (165). Shelley is influenced by Hume's view of literature as an outlet for a potentially destructive need for fantasy, which would otherwise threaten to contaminate reality. In her journals, she complains of being "neither independent, alone or settled – ... I cannot live as I do – without a metaphor I cannot live" (*Journals* 2.456). Shelley implies the function of metaphor in providing stability and identity. But in *Frankenstein* she emphasizes that such metaphors must not cross the boundary of fiction into reality, and are to remain firmly within the realm of literature.¹⁵ If the creature is a textual entity born of Victor's fascination with books, Shelley cautions her readers to maintain this distinction between text and reality. To fortify the boundaries of her own novel, she distances and encases the creature's narrative in *Frankenstein's* box-like epistolary form.¹⁶

Shelley also alludes to other prominent eighteenth-century political metaphors in the construction of the creature. She cites Volney's *The Ruins* as a major influence on the creature's course of education, and quotes Adam Smith's concept of the "invisible hand" in configuring the creature's relationship with the De Lacey family. Shelley was probably exposed to *The Ruins* via Percy, who read it in 1811 and heard Harriet Shelley reading it

¹⁵ In this idea, Shelley echoes Burke's assertion that the French Revolution is a theory that should never have been put into praxis. In 1815, Shelley read Burke's argument that "[t]he more deeply we penetrate into the Labyrinth of Art, the further we find ourselves from those ends for which we entered it" (*Journals* 2.639; Burke 76).

¹⁶ In this context, see Janis McLarren Caldwell's apt observation on the contrast between the creature's story and the novel's narratorial voice: "[t]he famous 'frame' or 'box-within-a box' surrounding *Frankenstein's* narration, surrounding the monster's autobiography, gives this novel about monstrosity a perverse neatness" (266).

shortly afterwards (Nablow 172). Like Percy and perhaps Shelley herself, the creature becomes acquainted with Volney orally. He overhears Felix reading *The Ruins* to Safie, and intuitively agrees with Volney's critique of "the strange system of human society" with its "immense wealth and squalid poverty" (*Frankenstein* 89). Like Wollstonecraft, Volney espouses an Enlightenment faith in the harmonious codependence of social regulation and individual wellbeing. Volney argues that "the sum of individual felicities has constituted the general felicity" (Volney 43). He also criticizes "whimsical geniuses, who from moroseness, from wounded vanity, or from a disgust to the vice of society, have conceived chimerical ideas of the savage state," alluding to Rousseau (193).¹⁷ Instead, Volney suggests that the presocial state is an exhausting battle for survival, in which people are helpless and essentially alone:

At first formed naked both in body and in mind, man found himself thrown, as it were by chance, on a confused and savage land Like other animals, without experience of the past, without foresight of the future, he wandered in the depth of the forest, guided only and governed by the affections of his nature; by the pain of hunger, he was to seek food and provide for his subsistence; by the inclemency of the air, he was urged to cover his body (Volney 37).

Volney imagines that man was impelled by a socially constructive variety of egotism to flee this predicament of isolation and form society (194). Thus, the creature's lesson in Volney's *Ruins* echoes Shelley's own lesson in her mother's social theory. The creature learns that independence is misery but that individuals are naturally designed to seek out happiness in communities. Egotism is presented as conducive to progress, distinct from what Volney terms as the "propensity to hurt our neighbor." The creature's disappointment, which follows shortly after his exposure to Volney's *Ruins*, is bitter and

¹⁷ Le Coat notes that the traveler's melancholic reflections on society are Rousseauvian (369). In contrast, Volney develops "a resolutely optimistic perspective in which history is no longer seen as a litany of human misdeeds but rather as the collective memory of a nation" (369-70).

sharp. Inspired by Volney's Enlightenment faith in sociability and driven by loneliness to desperation, the creature reveals himself to the De Laceys, hoping to find friendship. His subsequent rejection by the proponents of these lofty ideas explodes the myth that individual and collective needs can overlap.

Shelley makes a similar point by also referring to Smith's theory of the invisible hand (*Frankenstein* 85). Smith invokes the invisible hand as a metaphor of harmony among the different parts of the social body (cf. Smith, *Theory* 215). Crook notes Shelley's additional reference to Voltaire's *Candide*, which defines social wellbeing as each individual cultivating their own garden (Crook 85 N. a; cf. Voltaire, *Candide* 130). Thus, after helping Felix, the creature "observe[s], with pleasure, that he did not go to the forest that day, but spent it repairing the cottage and cultivating the garden" (*Frankenstein* 85). However, on discovering the identity of their benefactor, the De Laceys figuratively bite the "invisible hand" that feeds them. They first beat the creature and then rapidly decamp from his neighborhood. They abandon their home and destroy their garden, their sole source of a meager livelihood, which they thus leave neglected and no longer "cultivate" (cf. Voltaire, *Candide* 130). This painful episode exposes the broader failure of the Enlightenment vision of social cohesiveness as propounded by Volney, Smith, Voltaire, and Wollstonecraft. Shelley emphasizes that no model of community can hold individuals together, not even Rousseau's more conflicted theory of a general will which negotiates among individual differences. She suggests that these thinkers are all unrealistically optimistic in postulating the needs of individuals as mutually reconcilable within a broader social body.

Frankenstein reflects a culture that negates its conditions of being, and denies fundamental relations that give rise to the human subject. Instead, this culture constructs a narrative of originally unconnected individuals, who willingly unite into a collective body, which represents Rousseau's general will. The creature embodies the tragic implications of this political model – its origins in the effacement of maternal loss, its violence to women, to children, to the notion of community, to its fathers, to its integrity, and finally to itself. Shelley forms this allegory of the social contract in dialogue with Wollstonecraft, who could not avoid "the misery, the tyranny" of a deeply misogynistic culture (*Maria* 255). In constructing this critique, Shelley revises her mother's reading of Rousseau. She removes Wollstonecraft's anachronistic Enlightenment theory of progress, and foregrounds Rousseau's concern with inherent conflict. Shelley suggests that individualism cannot be accommodated in the service of a general will. In redressing the wrongs of her mother, of her father, and of Rousseau, she reflects the powerful influence of these writers. She keeps her criticism of family within the family. Like her parents, she is unable to offer a positive alternative, but rather constructs an exposé from within. Nearly two centuries later, contemporary society continues to engage in these themes of alienation, abjection, subaltern subjectivity, and gender politics, and to perpetuate Shelley's creature, which has become an icon of subsequent social ills.

Conclusion

The Social Contract: Romanticism and Beyond

As a unique invention of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political theory, a social contract negotiates the terms of agreement among individuals who seek to form a common social body. It also provides a model for late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writers, who share an aspiration to reconcile a private and sometimes idiosyncratic experience of individuality with a broader notion of sociability. Wordsworth, Godwin and Mary Shelley self-consciously invoke social contract narratives of a state of nature, and of social formation in their poems, novels and theoretical writings. But their evocations subvert the social contract assumption that individuals can unite into a greater social body. These writers are therefore influenced by the social contract's individualism, but troubled by its weak concept of sociability. Their respective texts all envision the breakdown of the social body into its constituent parts. The social contract thereby stipulates the terms of Wordsworth's, Godwin's and Shelley's texts, but they – in turn – subvert its premises, formulating their own pessimistic appraisals of its account of social cohesion.

For these British Romantic writers, Rousseau serves as a synecdoche for the larger social contract tradition. His *Social Contract* promises to extend individual freedom into a social model. But in practice, the society that Rousseau envisions requires individuals to submit their private wills to the general will. Rousseau proposes the notorious solution of forced freedom to address the problem of recalcitrant individuals. Thus, although Rousseau is critical of coercion, he is finally unable to provide an

alternative to it when faced with the challenge of reconciling asocial individuals to a shared existence. In *Julie, The Confessions* and other literary works, Rousseau develops a more personal, individual perspective, which criticizes social institutions. This subversive aspect of Rousseau's work had an especially formative influence on Romantic writers. Rousseau's foundational conflict between individualism and sociability is shaped by the preceding century of British political thought. Like Rousseau, Hobbes establishes commonality among diverse individuals via a coercive sovereign. In place of Hobbes's sovereign, Locke substitutes economic categories, which guarantee political stability through more subtle means of coercion. Social contract theory thereby contradicts its opposition to oppression, resolving its lack of natural sociability by qualifying individualism. Empiricist critics of the social contract postulate habit as a viable alternative to coercion. Thus, Hume argues that people may be selfish, but they are not self-sufficient. Through narrative, he suggests that they can adapt themselves to a social existence. Smith and Ferguson eliminate the need for sovereignty, but are left with weak theories of society. Thus, the Anglo-French social contract tradition and its Anglo-Scottish empiricist critics all face the dilemma of guaranteeing conformity in a society which innovatively privileges the individual. Social contract philosophy resolves this tension by focusing on social cohesion, and empiricism by its privileging of the individual. But all are similarly aware of an insurmountable obstacle in integrating the two values.

On varying levels, social contract writers and critics alike engage with the relationship between theory and literature within their respective works. This approach to literature as a site for expressing opinions too subversive for political theory influenced

British Romanticism. British Romantic writers retain the relative freedom that this tradition reserves for literature, but also empower literature as a discourse capable of influencing social practices. Their engagements with the social contract are particularly important because of their approach to literature as a site for exploring the dissident undertones of political theory.

My own approach in reading Romanticism through empiricist political theory offers an alternative to new historicism's criticism that Romantic literature is concerned with avoiding socio-historical realities. New historicist criticism seeks to reestablish the dual importance of critical and historical contexts. But its tendency to focus on critical contexts to the exclusion of British Romanticism's historical contexts has led Romanticism to be read from an anachronistic perspective. Over the last decade, a growing interest in local empiricist contexts has helped redefine Romantic individualism as a political position. I contribute to the re-contextualization of Romanticism explored by Alan Bewell, Gavin Budge, Cairns Craig, Jacques Khalip and Nancy Yousef, among others, and to their concern with the broader study of processes of individuation in Western culture. Individualism needs to be understood as a complex political position, always in dialogue with concepts of society, and Romanticism as a threshold moment in a cultural change still in operation.

Wordsworth posits literature as a site for negotiating individual freedom and social responsibility. But his *magnum opus*, *The Prelude*, is the target of new historicist controversy regarding his purported retreat from social contexts and his conservative view of the individual. Throughout *The Prelude*, Wordsworth engages in an extensive dialogue with Rousseau. Initially, he reads Rousseau's social theory somewhat naively,

expecting private individuals to cohere into a Rousseauvian general will in revolutionary France. He is horrified to discover that individuals fail to mesh, instead coming to prey on each other, and – in the case of Napoleon – to abuse their newfound power. Wordsworth withdraws from his initial aspiration to form a general will, instead focusing on the solitary individual. But he remains influenced by Rousseau in his view of the individual as always already antecedent to a broader community. Like Rousseau, Wordsworth emphasizes the specificities that constitute social identity – the individual's imbrications in domestic, local and literary contexts. Far from advocating social retreat, Wordsworth's individual is an inherently social construction.

Godwin is heir to the Rousseauvian conflict between individual and social needs. Scholars have often resolved this conflict by divorcing Godwin's positions into disingenuous stances, or unrelated chronological phases. In my reading of *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* and *Fleetwood*, individualism and sociability are closely related and always in dialogue with Rousseau. In *Political Justice*, Godwin presents an inherent conflict between positions of radical voluntarism and determinism which is partially influenced by Rousseau. In *Fleetwood*, he seeks to balance individual and social needs by positing marriage as a test case for forming a social contract between the individual and a broader community. Godwin's account of marriage is influenced by Mary Wollstonecraft's criticism that Rousseau excludes women from the status of individuals. But his portrayal of Fleetwood's relationship with his wife Mary Macneil remains constrained by Rousseau's view of women as auxiliaries to men, an extension of Rousseau's more general constricting notion of freedom as conformity. Through the ill effect of Mr. Macneil's advice, Godwin also rejects the possibility of benevolence, and

supports misanthropy. Thus, despite his radically individualistic vision, Godwin proves surprisingly skeptical about the possibility of forming a social body that can represent individuals. Anxiety about ensuing chaos leads him to qualify his concept of individuality, which becomes submissive and coerced by social duty. But Fleetwood's malaise suggests Godwin's final belief in the individual's need for self-mastery, which conflicts with social needs.

By contrast to Godwin's focus on the isolated individual, Mary Shelley forms one of Romanticism's most enduring and disturbing figures – Frankenstein's monster – to suggest the primary human need for companionship. Her emphasis is upon the ways that individualism fragments the social body and produces suffering. *Frankenstein* is preoccupied with Godwin, Wollstonecraft and their relationship to Rousseau. Shelley criticizes Wollstonecraft for attempting to apologize for Rousseau's chauvinistic attitude toward women and his abandonment of his children. Instead, she suggests that Rousseau's theory reflects a basic lack of empathy in human society, epitomized by the creature's exclusion. Shelley constructs the fantastic male creature as a metaphor which represents aspects that the general will must exclude in order to retain its control over individuals. By contrast, the female creature represents subaltern elements that must be aborted without representation. By forming a contrast between these two creatures, Shelley attempts to reassert the melancholic perspective of women, which has been suppressed by patriarchy. She also adopts Hume's perspective that literature exists as a repository for elements that would otherwise threaten to contaminate social realities, and suggests that political metaphor must remain clearly in the province of literature.

The social contract also endures as a formative cultural presence beyond the Romantic era. Rousseau affects nineteenth-century British writers, who translated his ideas into a variety of scientific, sociological, and literary discourses. In his essay *Sign of the Times* (1829), Thomas Carlyle identifies Rousseauvian individualism with social decline and the prevalence of the mechanical at the expense of the spiritual. In *The French Revolution: A History* (1837), Carlyle seeks to overcome the ensuing absence of social cohesion by positing the Rousseauvian individual as the foundational social unit. Carlyle's account influenced Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities* (1859), which likewise repeats Rousseau's endeavor to form a society of individuals. Dickens echoes Rousseau's *Confessions* in his criticism of French society (vii). Thus, the Victorian era remained preoccupied with the challenge of integrating isolated individuals into a common body, with Rousseau's texts, and with their enactment in France.

H. G. Wells's late Victorian *Love and Mr. Lewisham* (1900) reflects back on the Romantic period, drawing a contrast between the young, Romantic Mr. Lewisham and the social contract rhetoric of Mr. Chaffery, a professional con-man. Despite Chaffery's clear unreliability, Wells suggests that he is more astute than Lewisham in his shrewd reading of a *laissez-faire* social reality. Wells explains, "as time went on Lewisham found himself more and more in sympathy with Chaffery's bitterness against those who order the world" (Wells 147). Chaffery defends cheating with social contract rhetoric, about which he is surprisingly knowledgeable:

Honesty is essentially an anarchistic and disintegrating force in society, that communities are held together and the progress of civilization made possible only by vigorous and sometimes even violent Lying; that the Social Contract is nothing more or less than a vast conspiracy of human beings to lie to and humbug themselves and one another for the general Good. Lies are the mortar that bind the savage individual man into the social masonry. (Wells 122)

Through social contract philosophy, Chaffery stretches Hume's argument for the importance of fiction into a legitimization of fabrication and "humbug." Wells juxtaposes Chaffery's selfish individualism with Mr. Lewisham. At the age of eighteen, Lewisham dreams of realizing his liberal ambitions so "that those pamphlets in the Liberal interests will be no obscure platitudes" (Wells 11). Together with a platonic female friend, he develops an appreciation for "Shelley, Rossetti, Keats ... Socialistic publications in torn paper covers" (84). But these fantasies do not withstand the harsh realities of a premature marriage to Chaffery's step-daughter, economic hardship, and limited opportunities. Wells expresses nostalgia for a Romantic vision of society, which he juxtaposes with the aggressive individualism of social contract theory. But he also notes Romanticism's fragility and naïveté, which cannot withstand these values.

In Wells's imagination, Romanticism and the social contract occupy binary social poles. Chaffery admonishes Lewisham: "I don't think you fully appreciate the importance of illusion in life, the Essential Nature of Lies and Deception of the body politic" (Wells 122). But instead of Lewisham and Chaffery's antithetical discourses, these positions are closely intertwined in Romantic era texts. Motivated by the desire to extend their literary enterprises into a broader social vision and to achieve individual empowerment, British Romantic writers assume social contract rhetoric. They meet disappointment, but do not cede the social contract's individualistic premises and its aspiration to community. Lacking Lewisham's naïveté, they remain closely identified with this tradition, which endures as a part of their subsequent legacy.

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