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MARY SHELLEY'S MONSTROUS PATCHWORK: TEXTUAL "GRAFTING" AND THE NOVEL

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines selected prose fiction works of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley in an effort to establish a clearer understanding of the creative principles informing her writing, based on more evidence than her well-known novel Frankenstein provides. Overturning the hitherto dismissive and/or reductive critiques of her lesser-known works, this thesis challenges negative assessments by reinterpreting the structure of Shelley's fiction. Concentrating particularly on the early Frankenstein (1818), Mathilda (written in 1819), and The Last Man (1826), with a focus on the use of insistent embedded quotations, this thesis begins by exploring Shelley's belief in textuality as a form of "grafting." As scholars have suggested, Shelley's literary borrowings are a result of her materialist-based views of human reality. The persistent use of embedded quotations is one way in which Shelley's fiction represents texts as collations of materials. The core of the argument posits that citational "grafting" has distinctive and striking effects in each of the works examined. In Frankenstein, quotations underscore existential alienation by pointing to the need for texts to fill in the lacunae of human understanding; in Mathilda, the narrator uses citations to create a sense of personal identity; and in The Last Man, citational excerpts are used with the assumption that they are shared pockets of meaning belonging to a community of human readers. This reconceptualization of Shelley's writing contributes to the generic taxonomies that are now being used to retheorize "the novel" in more inclusive and specific ways.

RESUME

Cette thèse examine certains travaux sélectionnés de Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley dans un effort d'établir une meilleure compréhension des principes creatifs qui influencent son style écrivain, en considérant plus que seulement son roman populaire Frankenstein. Sans porter attention aux critiques négatives à propos des ses travaux moins connus qui prédominent jusqu'à date, cette thèse défie les points négatifs en réinterprétant les structures de ses textes. En se concentrant particulièrement sur la première version de Frankenstein (1818), Mathilda (1819) et The Last Man (1826), avec le point d'intérêt sur l'emploi des citations fréquentes, cette thèse commence en explorant la philosophie textuelle en forme de "greffe". Selon les études antérieurs de son oeuvre, l'emprunt littéraire de Shelley est un résultat de ses perspectives materialistes de la réalité humaine. L'utilisation fréquent des citations est une des façons avec laquelle Shelley représente les textes comme un collage de matériaux. L'essentiel de l'argument proposé est que la "greffe" de citations crée des effets importants et distincts dans chacun des travaux examinés. Les citations de Frankenstein créent une emphase sur l'étrangeté existentielle en démarquant les besoins d'un texte pour masquer le manque de compréhension humain; les citations de Mathilda sont utilisées par le narrateur pour donner l'illusion d'une identité personelle; et enfin les citations de The Last Man fonctionne sur le principe qu'ils sont des extraits partagés par une communauté de lecteurs. En réexaminat les travaux de Shelley, cette thèse contribue a élargir les taxonomies génériques qui son présentement employées pour decrire "le roman".

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SHORT TITLES LIST

FI Shelley, Mary. Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus, The 1818 Text. Ed. Marilyn Butler. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.

FII Shelley, Mary. Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus (1831). Ed. M.K. Joseph. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980.

FF Shelley, Mary. The Fields of Fancy. Mathilda. (1959). Ed. Elizabeth Nitchie. Studies in Philology. Extra series 3. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1959.

LM Shelley, Mary. The Last Man. (1826). Ed. Morton D. Paley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.

MT Shelley, Mary. Mathilda. The Mary Shelley Reader: Containing Frankenstein, Mathilda, Tales and Stories, Essays and Reviews, and Letters. Eds. Betty T. Bennett and Charles E. Robinson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.

The novelist is still a god, since he creates . . . what has changed is that we are no longer the gods of the Victorian image, omniscient and decreeing; but in the new theological image, with freedom our first principle, not authority.

-John Fowles

INTRODUCTION:

"SO VERY HIDEOUS AN IDEA"

The argument of this thesis examines selected prose fiction works of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851) in an effort to establish a clearer understanding of the creative and critical premises of her aesthetics. Until recently, such attempts have largely been based on her first published novel, Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus (1818) because it is considered her most successful work. I argue that what Shelley herself seems to have valued in her fiction, symptomatic of her philosophical scepticism, is in many ways incompatible with the organistic, author-focused criteria used in most critical assessments of her writing. Consequently, most of her fictional experiments have been at once misunderstood and considered unworthy of critical attention. An unfortunate result of this misunderstanding is an attitude of almost conventional apology for her works. Her fiction is said to consist of awkwardly diffuse, unwieldy narratives filled with passages of inexplicably exaggerated sentimentality. My thesis, which participates in the new movement to reread Shelley's work[1] and belongs to the larger context of the critical revision of Romanticism,[2]

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[1] A significant recent collection of rereadings of Mary Shelley is Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor, and Esther H. Schor, eds., The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein.

[2] See, for example, Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson, eds., At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist and Materialist Criticism, and Carol S. Wilson and Joel Haefer, eds., Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers

challenges this negative assessment. I reinterpret the structure of Shelley's fiction, its basic categorial logic of representation, in relation not only to psychogenetic claims about her writing, or to claims about its conceptual origins, but also to its peculiar tactics of engaging the reader's response.

Mary Shelley, apart from her notoriety as the author of Frankenstein, is usually remembered for being the daughter of the radicals Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, and the wife and later widow of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Traditionally, Shelley's reputation has been overshadowed by the fame of her poet-husband and by that of her creature.[3] However, she was a learned woman in her own right whose reading attests to the rigour of her education,[4] which was initiated and directed by Godwin in childhood, and encouraged by her husband later on. For Shelley, reading, learning, and writing were part of daily life. Her studies in literature and philosophy were both varied and extensive:

> Between January 1815 and the summer of 1816, the eighteen months before she conceived Frankenstein, she read some ninety works that are representative of her permanent interests. One important course was her

1776-1837.

[3] Walling points outs that Leigh Hunt, in "Blue Stocking Revels" (1837), sums up Mary's fame as follows: "And Shelley, four-famed--for her parents, her lord,/And the poor lone impossible monster abhorred" (ll. 209-10) (18).

[4] Emily W. Sunstein's biography of Mary Shelley, a revisionary life of the author, overturns many inaccurate and often pejorative ideas that were accepted in the past. This account of Shelley's life includes much information about her dedication to learning. See Sunstein's Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality.

> study with [P.B.] Shelley of the major English poets: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, and Southey, as well as Scripture for its poetry. Her other reading included The Canterbury Tales and Godwin's Life of Chaucer, William Beckford, Samuel Richardson, Joanna Baillie, Matthew "Monk" Lewis, Walter Scott, Ann Radcliffe; she also read Goethe and Schiller in translation . . . . (Sunstein 106)

Furthermore, she read many historical studies, memoirs, biographies, travel literature, and classical works; she also learned Latin, Italian and Greek.

> Indeed, Mary Shelley had a vital, inquiring intellect. As Ketterer argues, against [the]. . . characterization of Shelley as "a woman resolutely not philosophical". . . I would set the evidence of her reading in philosophy and also Trelawny's testament to her "fine intellect": "her head might be put upon the shoulders of a Philosopher." ("Androgyny" 267)

Shelley considered writing to be integral to her intellectual and emotional development. As she recounts in the famous "Introduction" to the 1831 edition of Frankenstein, she was writing stories as early as childhood.[5] After Percy's death, her writing became a financial necessity to support herself and her remaining child. She was a prolific writer: her projects included five novels after Frankenstein, one novella entitled Mathilda (only published in the twentieth century), several short stories

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[5] Shelley writes: "As a child I scribbled; and my favourite pastime, during the hours given me for recreation, was to 'write stories'" (FII 5).

(appearing in various popular journals such as The Liberal, The London Magazine, and The Keepsake), literary reviews, volumes of historical biographies, the editorial and annotation work involved in the posthumous publication of her husband's poems, three volumes of correspondence, and a detailed personal journal spanning the years 1814 to 1844.

Nevertheless, only in the past decade have the works of this remarkable writer, except for Frankenstein, begun to receive due attention. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, archival and editing work on primary texts resulted in The Collected Tales and Stories (1976), The Journals of Mary Shelley (1987), and The Letters of Mary W. Shelley (1990). A resurgence of interest in the "other" works of Mary Shelley is also reflected in several recent studies and editions of her work, including Mellor's Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters (1988), The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein (1993), and Blumberg's Mary Shelley's Early Novels (1993), a collection of selected works known as The Mary Shelley Reader (1990), and the latest editions of The Last Man by the University of Nebraska (1993) and by Oxford University Press (1994). Most recently, new editions of the original version of Frankenstein have been published by Oxford University Press (1994) and by Broadview Press (1994).

An examination of most of the studies of Shelley's lesser-known works up to the 1990s reveals that certain narrow criteria are at the root of their evaluation of Shelley's fiction. The criticism has been usually of two kinds. First, there is an older,

very reductive "identity spotting"[6] approach that locates the importance of reading the texts in the connections that can be drawn between Shelley's fictional characters and the literary figures with whom she was associated: Godwin, Percy Shelley, and her friend Lord Byron.[7] The second main approach is embodied in studies by scholars such as Mellor, Gilbert, and Gubar.[8] This kind of criticism identifies the feminist and/or anti-feminist content of Shelley's fiction, and it connects these findings with larger theories of gender and writing in the Romantic period. Other attempts have been made to locate the value of reading such a work as her third, futuristic novel The Last Man in the fact that it is an early instance of the science fiction genre[9] or in its exemplification of Romantic themes.[10] In useful but seriously limiting ways, however, these approaches are both reductive. What readers have found valuable in Shelley is referred to her texts' relation to highly selective and predetermined critical interests. These critical interests do not always coincide with either the psychogenetic inner logic or the construction of patterns of reader access that we encounter in her writing.

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[6] Elizabeth Nitchie, Mary Shelley: "Author of Frankenstein" (140).

[7] Notable examples are Elizabeth Nitchie, "Mary Shelley's Mathilda: An Unpublished Story and Its Biographical Significance," and Walter Edwin Peck, "The Biographical Element in the Novels of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley."

[8] See Anne K. Mellor, Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic.

[9] Examples of this kind include J. O. Bailey, Pilgrims Through Space and Time: Trends and Patterns in Scientific and Utopian Fiction, and I. F. Clarke, The Tale of the Future: From the Beginning to the Present Day.

[10] See for example, Ernest J. Lovell, "Byron and the Byronic Hero in the Novels of Mary Shelley," and L. J. Swingle, "Frankenstein's Monster and Its Romantic Relatives: Problems of Knowledge in English Romanticism."

The present decade has witnessed a growing wave of Shelley criticism that seeks to reinterpret her texts. Critics such as Mary Favret, Susan J. Wolfson, Alan Richardson, Laurie Langbauer, and Sonia Hofkosh[11] are among those who, focusing mainly on genre and Shelley's experimentation with form, provide new readings of many of her works. These readings often reveal tensions between the critical thinking behind Shelley's creative practices and the major tenets of "Romanticism" as they have come to be defined by traditional literary historians and theorists. Many such tensions already decisively shape the inclusion and opposition of the generic elements that comprise many of her texts. These readings often go beyond the assessment that Shelley's stance outside the "tradition" is a direct result of her gendered position as a writer. They are also informed by and contribute to the current reevaluation of what is understood as "Romanticism."

The definition of Romanticism and understanding of the thinking and writing that took place during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were long regarded as depending on the difference in the aesthetic principles of Wordsworth and Coleridge, or of Percy Shelley and Byron, or further of those between the "first" and "second" generation of Romantics. From the standpoint of the mid-1990s, however, these issues look vastly more complex. The critical inquiry of theorists such as Jerome

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[11] See Mary Favret, "Mary Shelley's Sympathy and Irony: The Editor and Her Corpus"; Susan J. Wolfson, "Editorial Privilege: Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley's Audiences"; Alan Richardson, "Proserpine and Midas: Gender, Genre, and Mythic Revisionism in Mary Shelley's Dramas"; Laurie Langbauer, "Swayed by Contraries: Mary Shelley and the Everyday"; and Sonia Hofkosh, "Disfiguring Economies: Mary Shelley's Short Stories," eds. Fisch et al, The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein.

McGann in the 1980s[12] have initiated a new school of ideas about the cultural and ideological struggles that have always been at the root of critical theories of Romanticism. A commitment to bringing a sophisticated historical awareness to literary analysis underlies this crucial reevaluation. Readings of hitherto unknown works conducted with a careful consideration of historical contexts, audiences, and ideas that run counter to the conventionally accepted aesthetic discourse, are now establishing a wider, more "dialogic view" of the period, laying bare the debates, struggles, and oppositions that were taking place socially, politically and artistically (Favret and Watson 2).

While within this revisionary movement there are many different concerns and interests, the unifying locus of inquiry that "characterizes these otherwise disparate approaches is an attention . . . to a wider range of genres beyond the romantic epic or lyric" (Favret and Watson 10). Mary Shelley, commonly acknowledged as an author who often experimented with form by writing in many different genres and by mixing diverse generic elements within the same text, is an especially promising site for such analysis. My reinterpretation of Shelley's fiction concentrates particularly on two lesser-known texts. Her novel The Last Man (1826) and the novella Mathilda (written in 1819; published in 1959) are early, experimental fictional narratives that thematize writing. More than the early Valperga, or The Life and Adventures of Castruccio (1823), a historically-based novel, and more than many of her subsequent writings, these texts are distinguished by their bold experimentation with genre as well as theme.

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[12] See Jerome J. McGann, The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation.

The Last Man is a long journal account of the end of human life on earth, and Mathilda consists of a letter written by a young female incest victim as she prepares to die. After considering the first version of the popular Frankenstein (1818), I analyze in these later texts the interaction of the structural categories of the psychogenetic and the representational.

The rhetorical focus of my critical reassessment is Shelley's characteristic strategy of the "embedded quotation":[13] her use of insistent direct citations (usually from poems and plays) throughout her narratives. While recent editions of her texts, particularly The Last Man, reflect extensive efforts to identify her many and often obscure quotations,[14] and while some critics have noted this peculiar feature of her writing, its function has not been carefully considered. Shelley uses embedded quotations in many other writings, including her personal journal and the prefaces to the 1824 and 1839 editions of Percy's poems. This technique does not indicate, as the majority of previous readers imply, a failure of originality but a belief in "textuality[15] as a form of grafting" (London 258). Such a textuality also manifests itself in the

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[13] Meena Alexander, Women in Romanticism (157).

[14] Morton D. Paley, editor of The Oxford World's Classics edition of The Last Man (1994) identifies many of Shelley's often paraphrased and puzzling unidentified quotations. In his prefatory remarks to the annotations, Paley notes: "Some of the several verse passages that have eluded identification may have been written by MWS herself" (471).

[15] "Textuality" in this thesis denotes the process of writing, "the manifestation of an open-ended, heterogeneous, disruptive force of signification" that is contained in a "text": "an open, infinite process that is both meaning-generated and meaning-subverting" (Lentricchia and McLaughlin, Critical Terms for Literary Study 40). For a discussion of this and other related terms, see Lentricchia and McLaughlin 39-40.

abundance of allusions in her works, and in the patchwork of genres--the journal, the letter, the biography, the travelogue, and the Gothic--that make up the structure of Frankenstein, Mathilda and The Last Man. Shelley's use of "indiscriminate textual borrowings" (London 258) is a product of her scepticism about the Romantic poets' faith in the mind's insight into "truth" and its power to create "reality." As Ketterer points out, her idea that, in literary creation, "'the materials must, in the first place be afforded'" by experience, is "taken . . . from either Locke or Hume" and reflects her profoundly materialist beliefs (Creation 17). For Shelley, the mind, with all of its imaginative abilities, exists within the limits of a physical world that defies rational comprehension.

The result of this philosophical stance is a text that draws on a multitude of different sources, and denies the author's privileged position of knowledge. In Shelley's work all texts seem to be in one way or another "recycled"--repeated, reused, existing within other texts--because humanity is trapped within language and physical experience. The figure of the poet-genius who is inspired by nature and the knowledge it embodies is replaced in Shelley by the figure of the narrator, stricken by grief or loss, who is denied access to meaning, and who recalls a vast tradition of writing in response to this denial.

This thesis contends that the effects of the "grafting" of literary citations in Frankenstein, Mathilda, and The Last Man are striking. A close examination of Shelley's citational strategies, including her selection of materials, her positioning of excerpts, and her direct or implied indications of their textual functions, reveals that

their use signals absence, gaps in or disruptions of meaning, or a concern with reader understanding. While this is the general pattern in all three texts, it is clear that there is a distinctive emphasis in each work.[16] In Frankenstein, the major citations appear in moments of emotional emptiness and lack of rational understanding. In Mathilda, the narrator uses citations as a response to the absence of a clear personal identity due to unexplained trauma, and as a way to engage the reader's sympathetic engagement. In The Last Man, the narrator cites freely, in moments of feeling or simply for the purposes of comparison or description, in order to appeal to and simultaneously construct the reader's sense of shared human sentiments and experiences.

My first chapter begins by examining Shelley's aesthetic principles. Chapter two focuses on an analysis of citational "grafting" in Frankenstein and Mathilda within the larger context of the novels' embodied views of knowledge and writing. Finally, chapter three considers The Last Man's serious epistemological concerns and beliefs about the function of writing, as a basis for exploring the novel's textuality.

The present new reading of Shelley's work does not attempt an exhaustive analysis, it is an effort to clear some critical space in which to consider what Shelley appears to have valued in her own fiction, and to conduct this investigation on the basis of evidence that goes beyond Frankenstein. Above all, my reading seeks to

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[16] I use "work" in this thesis as a synonym of the term "text" (see footnote 15) and do not retain Roland Barthes's specific definition of a "work" as "as closed, finished, reliable representational object" discussed in Lentricchia and McLaughlin (40). See also Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text."

provide an explanation of Shelley's unusual textuality, specifically her frequent use of citation, which has up now been dismissed or seen as a lapse or a creative "flaw."

Furthermore, this reconceptualization of Shelley's writing, based on key textual examples of her own aesthetic principles put into practice, contributes to the generic taxonomies that are now being used to retheorize "the novel" in ways that are at once more specific and more inclusive[17] than the canonical accounts of Ian Watt and John Richetti,[18] or even than the revision of their canon by such feminist critics as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar or by Marxist-oriented literary theorists and historians such as Michael McKeon.[19]

The thesis that follows, while not relying heavily on gender-critical analysis, nonetheless supports the effort to gain wider recognition for women's writing. Equally, it tries to broaden the understanding of the literary history of aesthetic theory and generic experimentation in the Romantic period beyond the standard premises that have been derived from the work of the canonical Romantics.

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[17] I refer here, for example, to J. Paul Hunter, Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction, and Nancy Armstrong, Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel.

[18] Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding; John Richetti, Popular Fiction Before Richardson: Narrative Patterns 1700-1739; and Michael McKeon, The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740.

[19] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic.

CHAPTER ONE

SHELLEY'S CRITICAL THINKING AND THE CRITICAL OPPOSITION

Works of art belong to the imagination, certain forms of which they realize.

-Mary Shelley, "Modern Italy"
(1829)

Of genius, power,
Creation and divinity itself
I have been speaking, for my theme has been
What passed within me.

-William Wordsworth, The Prelude
(written 1798-1805, pub. 1850)

1.1 Revealing the Seams

It is not only because of the hapless wretch of Frankenstein that Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley's name has been associated with images of the monstrous. Her reputation as an author, until recent years, has suffered much the same harsh labelling as Victor's patchwork creature. While in her Introduction to the 1831 version of Frankenstein, she affectionately bids the novel, her "hideous progeny," "go forth and prosper" (FII 10), and it has, much of her "other" work (as it is aptly called in a current collection of essays[1])--a large body of novels, short stories, historical biographies and travel writing--has been considered, until the 1990s, a mass of

[1] Fisch et al., The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein.

unpleasant reading. As Bennett and Robinson point out in their preface to The Mary Shelley Reader (1990), "most modern readers of Mary Shelley have not read enough of her works: they interpret the author on limited evidence, frequently on the basis of Frankenstein alone" (vii).

This thesis does not account exhaustively or in any sufficient way for the many and complex reasons for the negative reception that Shelley's other works have received since the early nineteenth century. This issue is inextricably tied to the specifics of the publishing and marketing of the texts, beliefs and perceptions about the woman writer, the tastes and interests of reading markets, and critical trends in academe. But it is certainly clear that Shelley did not satisfy the aesthetic and ideological expectations of her contemporary critics, and this precipitated decades of marginalization of her work. The majority of Shelley's writing did not receive any consideration until the mid-twentieth century.

Shelley's fiction was often attacked for what critics perceived as major deviations from the expectations of the novel: particularly its length, its style of writing, and its often deeply pessimistic and/or fanciful subject matter. Although most reviews of her second novel, Valperga or the Life and Adventures of Castrucchio (1823) were mainly favourable, The Monthly Review (May 1823) considered "the subject . . . not well-chosen, and the tale . . . tedious" (105). The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres (February 1826) viewed The Last Man (1826) as "a sickening repetition of horrors" (102-103). Similarly, The Monthly Review (March 1826) considered The Last Man "[t]he offspring of a diseased imagination and of a most

polluted taste" and concluded that "the whole course of [Shelley's] . . . ambition has been to portray monsters which could have existed only in her own conceptions" (333-35). As late as January 1966, Charles W. Mann in the Library Journal found the style of The Last Man "turgid" and declared that "Mrs. Shelley remains the author of a single book, and that, of course, is Frankenstein" (163). Mathilda, not published until 1959, also received many unfavourable reviews. Nineteenth-Century Fiction (March 1960) thought the novella was "admittedly 'bizarre'" and stated that "the most devoted Shelleyans are not likely to discover much merit in the strained and pretentious style" (373). J.M.S. Tompkins in Modern Language Review (April 1961) saw it as "is superficially a compound of sensationalism, analysis, landscape and lamentations, displaying Mary Shelley's genuine but unsufficing talent" (303).

A survey of the early assessments shows that at the root of the condemnation was a perceived lack of clear moral focus on the part of the author. Despite the subsequent phenomenal success of Frankenstein (1818), it was initially found to be missing a moral point: "the anonymous novelist's failure to moralize about the . . . blasphemous subject" was glaring (Poovey 122). Indeed, as Baldick notes in his study of Frankenstein, only in the 1831 Introduction is there any indication of God whose creative powers Frankenstein has dared to imitate; ultimately there is really no divine authority in the novel (Baldick 40-44).[2] The British Critic (April 1818) found that it had "neither principle, object, nor moral" (432-38). The Quarterly Review (January

[2] Mary Poovey sees this later moralizing as part of Shelley's attempt to become a more conservative figure in her later years. For a detailed treatment see The Proper Lady and The Woman Writer.

1818) condemned it because "it inculcates no lesson of conduct, manners, or morality; it cannot mend, and will not even amuse its readers," and they add, "the author . . . often leaves us in doubt whether he is not as mad as his hero" (379-85).

Similarly, The Last Man's negative reviews were largely due to the fact that critics did not see a moral justification. The Literary Gazette And Journal of Belles Lettres (February 1826) suggested that the novel was a display of Shelley's self-pity: why did the author not entitle the work "the last Woman? she would have known better how to paint her distress at having nobody left to talk to" (102-103). And even Mathilda, which was suppressed in Shelley's lifetime by Godwin, to whom she had sent the manuscript to be published,[3] and which only appeared in the twentieth century, was not considered to have an instructional purpose. Critics who did value the work did so by assigning it a point: the Philological Quarterly (April 1960) asserted that the "first part is clearly based on Mary's interpretation of her father's feelings towards her, and is surely one of the first such psychological studies" (159). At a time when psychoanalytic readings of texts were thriving in the field of literary criticism, it is no coincidence that the "point" of Mathilda would be seen as a psychological study. As Godwin was probably well aware, there would have been no such categories in which to interpret Mathilda in 1819 when his daughter had first sent it to him to read. Its failure to provide a moral justification would have sent reviewers into indignant

[3] "The manuscript held by Godwin was never returned to Mary, and is, presumably, lost. The copy that Mary retained remained unpublished among the Shelley papers." See Terence Harpold, "'Did you get Mathilda from Papa?': Seduction Fantasy and the Circulation of Mary Shelley's Mathilda."

rages over the impropriety of the subject and accusations about the anarchist philosopher and his errant daughter who had eloped with the married "atheist" poet, Percy Shelley.

Much of the negative reception was also based on the works' structure and style, and her novels were often pitted against one another on that basis. Valperga, for example, was praised by The Weekly Magazine (1823) for "reverting to the 'old style' of novel-writing, in which a history of men's lives was traced 'from the cradle to the tomb'" (Lyles 174), and The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck (1830), also a historical romance, escaped criticism. Lodore (1835) was favoured because, as The Courier (April 1835) explained, "unlike the previous novels of MS, [it] deals with familiar situations, its style 'quiet, easy, and flowing, and the sentiments natural'" (Lyles 179).

Falkner (1837), Shelley's last novel, fell somewhere in between the two stylistic and ideological extremes of Shelley fiction. The Monthly Review (March 1837) admitted the novel was "gloomy" but declared that "it is to the honour of her genius, and to the force as well as delicate beauty of her minute delineations that this gloominess is never felt to be unwelcome" (376-80). In contrast, The Weekly Chronicle (February 1837) wrote that in the novel "all common sense is entirely thrown overboard" (5). The Satirist (February 1837) declared Falkner "a failure--a lame, if not an altogether impotent attempt" (482).

"Like the monster . . . [Frankenstein] was something new under the sun, something freakish on the literary landscape" (Ketterer, Creation 10). This assessment was extended to a large part of Shelley's literary output. Interestingly, "long before the

monster of Frankenstein, monstrosity already implied rebellion," and the "obligatory feature of monsters in classical mythology is that they be composed of ill-assorted parts" (Baldick 13). The moral ambiguity of several of her novels, and her wordy, sentimental style which often included mixes of different generic elements such the historical narrative, the romance, and the Gothic, gave her narratives a "patchwork" textuality. Consequently, these works, which also embodied strongly gloomy and pessimistic themes, readily invited the description of monstrous aberrations of "the novel."[4] The novel, according to early nineteenth-century thinking, was, as The Literary Gazette (February 1837) claimed, for the "representation of actual life" (66-68).

The idea that novels should be, generally speaking, realistic representations of life with some purpose or aim has for some time existed in theory. Before and since the nineteenth century, conceptions of the novel as a genre have tended to simplify the form, excluding frequently appearing traits that were considered too unusual, digressive, or wildly unrealistic. This has come about because

> as an upstart species, the novel was at first reluctant to stray far from established aesthetic standards, and critics ever since have been loath to emphasize, or even admit seeing, features . . . that might threaten the novel's formal claims. (Hunter 30)

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[4] The female production of monstrosity has a long, interesting history. See Marie-Helene Huet, Monstrous Imagination, a recent publication that traces the long mythological tradition attributing the creation of monsters to women.

In the Romantic period, when poetry was the site of many innovations and was the subject of significant theoretical debate, the novel, although flourishing by the early years of the nineteenth century, was still suffering from an "inferiority complex" in comparison to more traditionally valued genres (Hunter 29).

The present reading identifies Shelley's own creative principles and rejects dismissive assessments that, as in the very early criticism, are informed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British aesthetic standards for the novel, or by subsequent reductive theories about the novel. Such readings, as well as many that have viewed Shelley's writing as "flawed" but valuable for the sake of critical interests like feminist theory, psychoanalysis, or science fiction, are often naive about their own ideological assumptions about what novels are, and do not allow the texts to be read on their own terms. McGann comments on this kind of fallacy as follows:

> When critics perpetuate and maintain older ideas . . . in continuities and processive traditions they . . . serve only the most reactionary purposes of their societies, though they may not be aware of this; for the cooptive powers of a vigorous culture like our own are very great. If such powers and their results are not always to be deplored, cooptation must always be a process intolerable to a critical consciousness, whose . . . obligation is to resist incorporation (Ideology 2).

Scholarly works on Shelley's fiction that intentionally overlook features of the discourse that seem unfamiliar to a conventional understanding of novels fail to see what values and ideas the texts themselves embody. At the same time, they contribute

to the entrenchment of established views of the genre without adding any new or different knowledge about its divergent manifestations.

1.2 Romantic Visions and Revisions

The process of reevaluating Shelley's works has only begun in the critical atmosphere of Romantic studies, which seek to bring to light many other discourses that have been obscured by the retrospective analysis of twentieth-century theorists. This approach joins the interests of diverse scholarly orientations including the unearthing of unknown works, the study of the history of the time and of reading audiences,[5] and the rereading of canonical texts from marginal perspectives. Such many-sided reevaluation is establishing a new understanding of Romanticism that aims to "recognize the mutual dependence of other seemingly opposed figures in the romantic critical tradition: the theoretical and the material, men and women writers, radicals and reactionaries, lyric poetry and prose novels" (Favret and Watson 2). Since the publication in 1979 of The Endurance of Frankenstein, there has been much interest in rereading Frankenstein, as well as the rest of Shelley's oeuvre, yet there have been few detailed and in-depth analyses of her unusual textual strategies.

Critics in the 1990s have been looking more closely at the rhetorical structures of Shelley's texts with a concern for Shelley's particular ideas about creativity and authorship. Two recent and significant articles investigate Shelley's techniques as an

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[5] A notable example is Klancher, The Making of English Reading Audiences.

editor of Percy Shelley's posthumous poems and link their findings with larger observations about her strategies as a writer. Mary Favret observes that, as Victor Frankenstein creates by piecing together the creature, so Shelley, as the editor of Percy's work, "creates" the poet for the reading public. Favret writes: "not only does she piece together and transcribe Percy's poetry," which was "so confused a mass, interlined and broken into fragments," mere "scattered remains," but she "'animates' this body of work" ("Sympathy" 17). Analyzing the interplay between Percy's poems and Mary's prose notes to the poems, Favret sees a strong tension between the two genres and argues for Shelley's subtle undermining of the idealism of the poetry to display her sense of the primacy of prose. According to Favret, the core of the creative act for Shelley, demonstrated in her editions of Percy's work, is the act of unification and arrangement of materials.

Similarly, Susan J. Wolfson examines Shelley's role as editor and the implications her editorial work has for her practice of writing. Like Favret, Wolfson invokes the metaphor of Frankenstein to illustrate Shelley's general editorial techniques of transcribing, piecing, editing, and publishing the mass of her husband's writing. She compares Shelley's editing to

> the twin dramas of production represented in . . . the introduction [to the 1831 Frankenstein] . . . . as "Author" she invented her work from fragments of inspiration, struggling to reverse the "mortifying negative" of "blank incapability" . . . with the "progeny" that is her story . . . and [similarly]. . . its eponym, also an "author" animated a corpse from the

> scraps and fragments he gleaned from the dead, "bestowing animation" by "collecting and arranging . . . materials." ("Editorial" 48)

The conflation of Victor's hideous piecing of the creature with Shelley's editorial work, and with her writing of fiction, has significant bearing on the understanding of Shelley's philosophical views about the imagination that inform her textuality.

For Shelley, the creative process is circumscribed by the material conditions of human existence. She writes:

> "Invention . . . does not consist in creating out of void but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded . . . It consists in the capacity of seizing on the capabilities of a subject and in moulding and fashioning ideas." ("Editorial" 48)

Shelley believes that the substance, the "materials," must exist in order for "invention" to take place because to her understanding "the finite nature of the material of this world" forever dashes our hopes "'that point to the clouds'" (Manson and Stewart 235). This attitude reflects a strongly materialist commitment that, as Ketterer explains, can be seen in a comparison with her creature's first conscious awakenings:

> Like the literary world, the monster's awareness of an outside world involves an ordering and clarifying of originally chaotic impressions. Darkness and "A strange multiplicity of sensations" give way to light and distinct forms. (Creation 11)

Ketterer points to Lockean philosophy as the intellectual root of this formulation but also suggests that Hume may have been an influence (Creation 11, 17). The Shelleys'

reading list shows that Mary read Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690) in 1816 and 1817 and Hume's Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects (1753-56) in 1817 and 1818. In either case, she is drawing on an understanding of the mind as operating within a strictly physical reality where it gains knowledge from sense impressions, received information, and experience. In the fictional world of Frankenstein, Shelley's conception of a creature that is "a poor grotesque patchwork, a physical mess of seams and wrinkles, . . . introduces a consideration of the material universe which challenges and undermines the purity of idealism" (Kiely 161).

Shelley's philosophy directly subverts the Romantic poets' organicist beliefs about the imagination and literary creation, as articulated and developed most notably by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Percy Shelley. "Organicism" conceives "the cosmos (reality) as a process rather than as a substance, an activity in which the material world, the mental or the ideal, and the Divine mutually involve and interpenetrate each other" (Perkins 16). In the works of the English Romantics it is "present as a basic conception of reality . . . [and] . . . guides critical interpretation and poetic vision" (Perkins 16). In this paradigm the mind has some access, usually intuitive or emotional, to a realm beyond that experienced by the senses. The implication of such noumenal power is unlimited creative potentiality, and indeed the Romantic poets heralded the overthrow of conventional literary forms for newer, more "original" literary expressions. On that basis, many notable writers and thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were compelled by the notion that the

imagination is able to penetrate the commonplace and intuit the "truth" of life, to create "reality" based on the powers it possesses.[6]

Mary Shelley's materialist philosophical ideas, underpinning her view that reordering existing ideas constitutes creation, lead her to object to the Romantic poets' celebration of creativity's inextricable link with originality. In the 1831 Introduction, she vividly illustrates her concern with the problematic notion of definitive beginnings and origins:

> Every thing must have a beginning . . . and that beginning must be linked to something that went before. The Hindoos give the world an elephant to support it, but they make the elephant stand upon a tortoise" (FII 8).

In Frankenstein such a challenge to creative "originality" in reference to material "origins" is dramatized in Victor's ambitious attempt to create "a new species" who would "bless" him as "its creator and source" (FII 54). Symbolically, Shelley has Victor use the remains of dead humans and animals as building materials. As the novel underscores, he merely perpetuates the conflicts and dramas of his own species in his

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[6] Riasanovky, in The Emergence of Romanticism has explored the issue of the religious, specifically Christian, beliefs behind the poets' creative aspirations: "In the early Romanticists' pantheistic vision . . . the ego either became the One (by appropriating the 'external' world as an extension of its creative subjectivity) or was absorbed into the One. In either case, the individual consciousness--even as it was enthraled by its capacity to transcend finitude--confronted the prospect of its annihilation" (5).

"original" creation. The epigraph to the novel, Adam's address to God from Milton's Paradise Lost, is telling:

> Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
>
> To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
>
> From darkness to promote me?

These words apply more to the creature who has been given life than to Frankenstein. Victor's "new species" is shown to be human, and his claims to originality are proven illusory.

Mary Shelley's philosophical scepticism, which results in her rejection of the Romantic poets' notions of organicism and creative originality, has affinities with what Anne K. Mellor terms the "romantic-ironic" work of the early nineteenth century in England. Romantic irony, most notably conceptualized by Friedrich Schlegel just before the turn of the nineteenth century, "posits a universe founded in chaos and incomprehensibility rather than in a divinely ordained teleology" (Irony vii). Based on the philosophies of Locke, who claimed that there may be no real link between "objects, the ideas . . . that [they] produce in the human consciousness, and the words people use to express those ideas," and Hume, who argued that humans can only know their "immediate, subjective sensations," romantic irony opposes the visionary, Judeao-Christian-based framework for understanding the world present in many of the poetic works of the Romantic period, known as "natural supernaturalism" in the theory of M. H. Abrams (Irony 3-5). The romantic ironist subscribes to a particular view of the universe that has a distinctive artistic corollary:

> Ontologically . . . [they] see the world as fundamentally chaotic. No order, no far goal of time, ordained by God or right reason, determines the progression of human or natural events. This chaos is abundantly fertile, always throwing up new forms, new creations. But insofar as these forms are static and finite, they are inevitably overwhelmed by and reabsorbed into the process of life. (Irony 4)

By creating new forms and simultaneously deconstructing them, the romantic ironist can participate in a greater creative process. Characteristics of works of romantic irony include belief in the failure of language to "adequately express the limited perceptions" of the "chaotic abundance of becoming" (Irony 10) and an attention to mixtures of literary genres of all types (Irony 19).

Mary Shelley's experimental fiction displays many features of romantic-ironic works as defined by Mellor: the belief in the limitations of human understanding, scepticism about language's ability to communicate ideas and perceptions, and a hybrid textuality that combines various generic elements. However, Shelley's critical and creative principles do not neatly correspond to the characteristics of romantic irony. As Mellor explains, the romantic-ironist

> is filled with enthusiasm as with skepticism. He is as much a romantic as an ironist. Having ironically acknowledged the fictiveness of his own patternings of human experience, he romantically engages in the creative process of life by eagerly constructing new forms, new myths. (Irony 5)

Shelley cannot fully commit herself to absolute chaos and celebrate it in her literary productions because she firmly distrusts the human mind's ability to apprehend, to any extent, the grander order or lack of order in nature. Even the possibility of a universe of chaos may be human imagining. Shelley only undertakes "one half of the romantic-ironic operation, that of skeptical analysis and determination of the limits of human language and consciousness" typical, as Mellor asserts, of "modern deconstructionists" (Irony 5).[7]

For Shelley, the imagination, both as a faculty of the mind and in forms of expression, exists within and explores only the physical world. Therefore, it can only express its own understanding, ordering, and perception of what it experiences. As she declares in "Modern Italy":[8] "Works of art belong to the imagination, certain forms of which they realize; those who do not possess this portion of mind are incapable of perceiving the excellence of the objects created only to be understood by it" (Bennett and Robinson 362). The model of creation present in the works of her poet-contemporaries, and interestingly in the texts that Mellor has classified as romantic-ironic, is radically altered by Shelley. Whereas these artists celebrate the imagination for its role creating great artistic products that mirror the universe (however they may

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[7] Accordingly, in her introduction to The Last Man, Mellor declares the novel "the first literary text to base itself on the philosophical concept we now call Deconstruction" (xxii).

[8] "Modern Italy" appeared in the Westminster Review (July 1829).

conceive it), for Shelley art merely reflects the human imagination, which is expanded and actualized in its various creative productions.

1.3 Textual "Grafting"

The Romantic poets believed that "poetry," as a product of the imagination in connection with the natural world, "can transcend the conflicts and transiencies of this time and that place" (McGann 69). For Mary Shelley, the novel presented a more fitting genre for the expression of her creative principles, and certainly by the early nineteenth century "the novel at least rivalled poetry and certainly outstripped the drama as the most popular of literary forms" (Perkins 8). Shelley's experimental fiction, while not adhering to the formal, organicist claims of the novel, in its undermining of the principles of teleology and unity through its inconclusive narratives and patchwork textuality, nonetheless explores the novel's other possibilities. Hunter comments:

> Much of the novel's appeal has always been in its ability to do so many things . . . and one reason for that capability is its incredible capacity to include--to absorb other things whole . . . to move easily among different modes and styles in the process of telling a story. (Hunter 54)

For Shelley, including or absorbing "other things whole" is a result of her belief that writing, like editing, is a process of collating and arranging materials. This procedure produces a text that, by its inclusion of multiple sources and forms, is a more accurate

reflection of her belief that human knowledge is derived from experience and information found in the physical world.

Such textuality is not limited to Shelley's novels. An examination of some of her other works, including the short stories and the dramas Proserpine and Midas, reveals a characteristic tendency of joining disparate textual elements within the same work. Alan Richardson's study of Shelley's two mythological dramas investigates the tension inherent in the texts because of the different genres they bring together. For the dramas, Percy Shelley wrote the visionary lyrics, and Mary the dramatic exchanges "with their emphasis on quotidian particulars" ("Mythic Revisionism" 125). The lyrics stand in contrast to the dramatic passages where they appear and, as Richardson asserts, "the disequilibrium which critics persist in remarking on between the two Shelleys' contributions, is almost certainly intended" ("Mythic Revisionism 125).

In an examination of Shelley's handling of the Romantic opposition between the commonplace and the extraordinary, Laurie Langbauer scrutinizes the role of the "sutures" of Shelley's fiction. Langbauer focuses mainly on Shelley's short story "The Swiss Peasant," first written for the literary annual The Keepsake in 1830, which she reads as Shelley's "meditation on the role of the everyday" ("Swayed" 187). Langbauer's argument is that the "point not just of Frankenstein but also of all of Shelley's generically mixed work (is it science fiction, Gothic, [or] domestic realism?) is the impossibility of coherence, as well as the price we pay striving for it" ("Swayed" 187). Regardless of particular interpretive differences, all insightful readings have

recognized that Shelley's works embody a rejection of the organic integrity of any "body" of writing.

Some feminist revisions of Shelley's fiction draw a clear link between her favoring of the decentered and the fragmented, both thematically and textually, and her gendered position as an author. Mellor argues in her reading of Frankenstein that the moral virtue of the bonds of family and the feminine, domestic sphere that is depicted in the novel is linked to an aesthetic of beauty. Victor's mistake of rejecting his creature, as Mellor understands it, is "in Mary Shelley's eyes both a moral and an aesthetic failure, one that . . . results in the creation of a monster both hideous and evil" (Monsters 126). Therefore, for Mellor, Shelley's exploration of the violation of the aesthetic of beauty aims to prove a feminist point. In Gilbert and Gubar's consideration of The Last Man, the novel's introduction, with its description of the Sybil's caves containing leaves that are "scattered, fragmented, barely comprehensible," is a metaphor for Shelley's view of her role as a female author. This comparison reflects the larger parable of the "woman artist who enters the cavern of her own mind . . . . [There] the body of her precursor's art, and thus the body of her own art, lies in pieces around her, dismembered, dis-remembered, disintegrated" (Gilbert and Gubar 98). Newer studies also tend to attribute these structures to a feminine mode. Alan Richardson, citing Stuart Curran, writes that

> women like Mary Robinson and Anna Laetitia Barbauld reject the "visionary flight" and "investment in symbols" . . . of male Romantic verse . . . for a contrary, "actual vision" concerned with the quotidian,

> the fragmented and decentered . . .[where one is] "assembling a world out of its disjointed particulars" ("Mythic Revisionism" 125).

Bette London has challenged the kind of reading that is informed by a presupposition that the material and the decentered or fragmented as textual and thematic preoccupations in Shelley's work, particularly in Frankenstein, are necessarily representative of a feminine literary mode or ideological bias. On the contrary, London argues that Shelley's deliberately "patched" text is an expression of the novel's informing belief in the fragmented nature of the construction of male identity. Focusing on the "seams" of the text of Frankenstein, with particular reference to what she terms its "insistent literary allusions and indiscriminate textual borrowings," London makes a case for the text's function of exposing "the material conditions that constitute textuality as a form of grafting" (London 258). London attributes this characteristic tendency to Shelley's opening "to question the copied status of the text she copies into her own," by writing "in a hand not distinctly her own" (London 258). London redraws the boundaries of gendered readings of the novel. "[C]ritical thinking," she comments,

> demands, among other things, a renewed attention to the historical specificity of the construction of masculinity and a recognition that masculinity, as much as femininity, is created by cultural negotiations and contestations. It insists that brokenness has no necessary or exclusive connection to the feminine . . . . (London 261)

London convincingly raises doubts about the validity of sweeping claims concerning the "feminine" textual features of Shelley's works. But by the same token, London's participation in the current gender-critical rereadings of Frankenstein is in itself an indication of the problematic nature of current scholarship on Shelley. Much of it is informed by the ongoing multifarious discourses of feminist theory; in other words, London's reading is as much an expression of London's particular reformulation of a feminist position as it is a reading of the nove

Shelley's inclusion of various genres and sources and her insistence on the patchwork text are a result of her materialist philosophical views and the principle of "invention" informing all of her writing. This artistic and critical result is the procedure and effect that London's term textual "grafting" so vividly describes. Shelley's "unorthodox citational strategies" are one significant way in which her works persistently represent texts as patchwork. Favret points out that Shelley's contemporaries also typically included citations, usually poetical excerpts, in their novels:

> Like other women novelists of the period, Radcliffe and Smith often introduced or concluded their chapters with excerpts from their own poems, or from favorite poets such as Cowper or Thompson. Normally these verses stood as introduction to or summary of the events to come. Nor was it unusual for these novelists to integrate original poetry into

> the story itself, usually as the creations of the heroine. ("Sympathy" 38)[9]

Shelley's experimental novels fully explore the use of the embedded quotation. The first Frankenstein, published in 1818, exemplifies the early employment of this strategy. In Mathilda, written in 1819, the use of citations is more frequent and may be what prompted critics to find the style "strained" and "pretentious" (Nineteenth-Century Fiction, March 1960, 373). In The Last Man, which Shelley began five years later, and which received the most negative reviews of all of her novels, embedded quotations are numerous. Like Victor Frankenstein, all of the narrators in these texts join and "graft" literary sources, although they remain within the confines of an indifferent, often hostile natural world where meaning is elusive.

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[9] The original title page of Ann Radcliffe's The Romance of the Forest advertises this compositional method: The Romance of the Forest: Interspersed with Some Pieces of Poetry.

CHAPTER TWO

FRANKENSTEIN (1818) AND MATHILDA (1819):

AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE IN THE EARLY WORK

> . . . the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul:
> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy
> We see into the life of things.
>
> -William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey"
> (1798)

> Farewell doubts--painful meditation of evil & the great, ever inexplicable cause of all that we see--I am content to be ignorant of all this happy that not resting my mind on any unstable theories I have come to the conclusion that of the great secret of the universe I can know nothing . . .
>
> -Mary Shelley, The Fields of Fancy
> (written in 1819)

2.1 Frankenstein's Patches

George Levine asserts that while Frankenstein "echoes . . . old stories [such as that] of . . . Prometheus," it is more importantly a tale about a "modern" Prometheus ("Ambiguous" 4). The subtitle, The Modern Prometheus, fuses two versions of the Prometheus myth, a fusion that emphasizes the novel's lack of a metaphysical framework. The first version, most commonly known through Aeschylus's Prometheus

Bound, was that of Prometheus "pyrphoros," who had stolen fire against the will of Zeus, the ruler of the Olympian gods, to benefit humankind. The second version is that of Prometheus "plasticator," who is thought to have created or perhaps recreated humankind by using clay. By the second or third century A.D., the two elements of this myth merge together: the fire stolen in the first version was imagined as the fire of life that Prometheus used to bring his clay man to life in the second version (Joseph v-vi). In Frankenstein, Victor attempts to imitate the divine spark of life but his narrative indicates merely man-made results. In this way, the novel creates "the myth of mankind as it must work within the limits of the visible, physical world" ("Ambiguous" 6-7).[1]

As a novel preoccupied with "the quest for knowledge" (Rubenstein 174), Frankenstein raises large epistemological questions that cannot be answered within a strictly material reality. The novel is "about the problematical nature of knowledge," and its "central symbol of this final unknowability is . . . the nameless monster" (Ketterer, Creation 93). Accordingly, the pivotal event of the plot, Victor's rejection of the creature, remains enigmatic: it is never made clear why Frankenstein is so horrified by results that he has struggled so feverishly to obtain. Moreover, the nature of the creature is never clearly defined or understood. He asks: "What was I? The question again recurred, to be answered only with groans" (FI 97). Despite Victor's insistence on the creature being a "daemon," his intellectual development and emotional

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[1] Levine argues that this informing philosophical position is the basis for much of this novel's influence. Frankenstein was an early instance of the trends that came with the Victorian novel. See George Levine, "Frankenstein and the Tradition of Realism."

experiences disturbingly point to his fundamentally human nature. By the end, "the reader is compelled to the recognition that the monster, in a real sense, is the corporeal world of human reality" (Ketterer, Creation 94). This conclusion has serious implications for the human condition. For if, as Shelley posits, the world is as devoid of meaning as the creature, then human beings also lead an empty and perhaps purposeless existence.

The problem of knowledge in Frankenstein is not limited to ontological concerns in a universe that is decidedly material. The novel is also preoccupied with language and the difficulty of linguistic systems in conveying meaning. In Robert Walton's second letter to his sister, Margaret Saville, he explains that language "is a poor medium for the communication of feeling" (FI 8). Certainly Frankenstein never allows its reader to forget this. All of the characters in the novel suffer from a strong frustration with language's inadequacy. "Phrases such as 'I cannot describe to you,' 'It is impossible to communicate,' and 'I do not understand'. . . echo in speeches throughout the novel" (Behrendt 80). Interestingly, the tone of the novel has always been a target of criticism. Frankenstein has been considered by critics to be "radically flawed by its sensationalism, by the inflexibly public and oratorical nature of even its most intimate passages" (Levine, "Ambiguous" 3). This criticism prompted Mellor to devote considerable attention to the issue in her study of Shelley, placing the blame for the stylistic awkwardness on Percy's detrimental corrections of the text.[2] However,

[2] For a detailed analysis of Percy's alterations of the manuscript, see Mellor, Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters (59-69).

this linguistic awkwardness is illustrative of the novel's problem with language as a way of conveying meaning. The "elaborate formal rhetoric" disguises "the absence of explanation"; in other words, the "inadequacy of Mary Shelley's explanatory language is almost precisely the point--rational discourse cannot fully account for the experience, which comes to us with the authenticity of irrational dreams" (Levine, "Ambiguous" 20-21).

The overall structure of the novel also reflects the problem of misunderstandings and imprecise meanings inherent in linguistic communication. Frankenstein is "an epistolary novel, although the initial epistolary format first metamorphoses into a journal format and subsequently all but disappears, reappearing only at the very end" (Behrendt 79). The English explorer, Robert Walton, frames the entire narrative. His letters/journal to his sister relate: his situation, circumstances, and feelings as he makes his way to the North Pole; Victor Frankenstein's fantastic account; the creature's tale that is given by Victor; the end of Victor's story; and his own perspective and encounter with the creature. In its structure of concentric layers,[3] the novel "becomes . . . a polyphonic work in which meaning is relative, the product of a complex interaction among characters, speakers . . . and readers . . . (Behrendt 79).

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[3] Fred V. Randel reads this structure as "modelled upon the anatomical shape and physiological function of the uterus. Within its life-sustaining enclosure, the monster-offspring's novelistic life and unique worth are sustained . . . he is the foetus . . . at its center" ("Frankenstein, Feminism, and the Intertextuality of Mountains" 515-32). Marc A. Rubenstein says this structure mirrors the "circumpolar geography which Walton is exploring" ("'My Accursed Origin': The Search for the Mother in Frankenstein" 165-194).

In a world where there is no stable center of knowledge and where language is a barrier to understanding, texts are crucial sources of meaning. In the novel, texts permeate and shape human consciousness. The creature's story of his development is in many ways paradigmatic of the effect of texts on the mind. After his initial learning from sense impressions, the creature learns from listening and watching the Delacey family, and from reading. In his stay in the hovel, where he daily engages in spying on his "beloved cottagers" (FI 102), he describes having found "a leathern portmanteau, containing several articles of dress and some books" (FI 103). The books, from which he reads and learns, are Milton's Paradise Lost (1667), Plutarch's Parallel Lives (A.D. 100), and Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774). The creature explains that these produced in him "an infinity of new images and feelings" (FI 103) that echo the earlier description of his first experiences of life, where he describes the "strange multiplicity of sensations" that seized him: he "saw, felt, heard, and smelt"; and these sensations urged him to seek food, drink, and shelter (FI 79-80). These books not only teach him about the world, they shape his experience of living. When he confronts Victor at the foot of Mont Blanc, he adopts Miltonic (Biblical) theology to impress upon Victor his duty to him:

> Oh, Frankenstein, be not equitable to every other, and trample upon me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember, that I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. (FI 77)

Similarly, in Victor's persistent references to the creature as a "devil" or a "daemon," the language and images of Judaeo-Christian religion permeate his thinking, even though in his education, he was "impressed with no supernatural horrors" (FI 33). In this fictional world, where meaning beyond physical reality is not provided by a divine framework, knowledge derives from textual (man-made) sources.

This importance of textual knowledge is also seen in the way books are shown to determine the character's personalities: as Bennett and Robinson point out, "books define each of the narrators" (Bennett and Robinson vii). Clerval's and Elizabeth's sensitive natures originate in their reading of romance and poetry; Walton's exposure to voyages of exploration begins in his "good uncle Thomas's library" (FI 6), and Victor's own curious and daring nature begins to form with his reading of "the works of Cornelius Agrippa" (FI 22).

The novel as a whole plays out this notion that textual sources provide meaning in its intimate awareness of a vast culture of literature to which it alludes, from which it cites, and with which it has thematic affinities, or imitates generically. Literary citations in the novel have often been examined, along with its other literary references, in order to elucidate the implications of its influences. However, the quotations do not end their function with a transportation of thematic significance into the text. In Frankenstein, citations, whether substantial or brief, act as textual patches that signal emptiness of meaning, or loss, while they materially cover the gaps left by a text that is haunted by the absence of absolute knowledge.

Victor's journey to the summit of Montanvert is a significant episode in which verse citation appears. It occurs during the excursion to the valley of Chamounix that Alphone Frankenstein suggests to restore Victor to his "wonted serenity" (FI 72). Victor decides on the morning after the family's arrival to "go alone to the summit of Montanvert" (FI 74) to conceal his feelings of melancholy from his father. He sets off on his hike remembering his first, emotionally uplifting view of the area:

> I remembered the effect that the view of the tremendous and ever-moving glacier had produced upon my mind when I first saw it. It had then filled me with a sublime ecstacy [sic] that gave wings to the soul, and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy. The sight of the awful and majestic in nature had indeed always the effect of solemnizing my mind, and causing me to forget the passing cares of life. (FI 74-75)

Victor ascends the path up the mountain, amid "a scene terrifically desolate" and dangerous, where "stones continually roll from above" that can bring "destruction upon the head of the speaker" (FI 75). Rainfall "added to the melancholy impression" of the sights (FI 75). Ironically, when he nears the summit, he is not moved to "sublime ecstacy [sic]" but rather reflects on the tenuous nature of human happiness and humanity's susceptibility to suffering in the physical world:

> Alas! why does man boast of sensibilities superior to those apparent in the brute; it only renders them more necessary beings. If our impulses were confined to hunger, thirst, desire, we might be nearly free; but

now we are moved by every wind that blows, and a chance word or scene that that word may convey to us. (FI 75)

At this point in the narrative a quotation appears from Percy B. Shelley's "Mutability"[4] that concurs with the idea of the tenuous nature of human happiness expressed by Victor. The verse citation is inserted between two prose paragraphs; it is not clear whether it is part of Victor's thinking on the mountain, or whether this was written in by him later when he edits Walton's journal,[5] or whether, perhaps, Walton has included it himself.[6] The last two stanzas of "Mutability" are joined as one and inserted into the text:

We rest; a dream has power to poison sleep.
We rise; one wand'ring thought pollutes the day.
We feel, conceive, or reason; laugh of weep,
Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away;
It is the same: for, be it joy or sorrow,
The path of its departure still is free.
Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;
Nought may endure but mutability! (FI 75-76)

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[4] "Mutability" was published with Alastor: or the Spirit of Solitude, 1816. See Hutchinson (523).

[5] Walton writes to Margaret: "Frankenstein discovered that I made notes concerning his history: he asked to see them, and then himself corrected and augmented them in many places" (FI 179).

[6] Walton mentions his poetic endeavors earlier in his letters: "I perused . . . those poets whose effusions entranced my soul, and lifted it to heaven. I also became a poet, and for one year lived in a Paradise of my own creation" (FI 6-7).

It is not only the obvious thematic affinity between the cited poem and Victor's thoughts that is significant. The quotation's presence represents Victor's inability to transcend the temporal world and to escape text. Victor had intended to be moved to sublime ecstasy by the view, but he is unable to obtain inspiration or a response to his concerns, and his entrapment in the "cares of life" (FI 75) is for this reason even more strongly felt.

Percy B. Shelley's poem "Mont Blanc," appearing in his and Mary Shelley's early joint publication, History of a Six Weeks' Tour (1817), is a comparable but very different response from Victor Frankenstein's. Looking at Mont Blanc, the speaker perceives:

> . . . The secret Strength of things
> Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
> Of Heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
> And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
> If to the human mind's imaginings
> Silence and solitude were vacancy? (ll. 139-44)

While the poet is also in awe of the sublimity of the scene, he senses "The secret strength of things" (l. 139) that, he posits, permeates the human mind and nature. Although the "power" (l. 27) remains an "unknown omnipotence" (l. 53), it is not a void or an emptiness that is felt, but a silence. And the "human mind's imaginings" (l. 143) are also themselves a power that interprets signs of "secret strength" (l. 139). Since nature cannot provide answers to Victor's concerns, and because he, unlike the

poet, sees division not harmony between humanity and nature, the only alternative to intense emotional emptiness and an absence of reasonable explanation is to respond with textual engagement.

A glimmer of hope, however, appears in the following paragraph. Victor gazes at Mont Blanc, looming "in awful majesty" (FI 76). "My heart", expresses Victor,

> which was before sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy; I exclaimed--"Wandering spirits, if indeed ye wander, and do not rest in your narrow beds, allow me this faint happiness, or take me . . . away from the joys of life." (FI 76)

The joy that he experiences is, suspiciously, only "something like joy," and it is soon shown to be illusory. The possibility of the existence of "wandering spirits," or of transcending, even momentarily, the weight of the material world, is promptly deflated in the next sentence when Victor relates his view of an oncoming figure: "As I said this, I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed" (FI 76). That "man" is the creature, "no spirit of the departed, nor any beneficent spirit of nature" (Brooks 206), and his presence is a striking reminder of material reality. Victor declares it was a "sight tremendous and abhorred": "it was the wretch whom I had created" (FI 76). Both moments of potential spiritual inspiration, at the sight of Montanvert and of Mont Blanc, are undermined by an insistence on the concrete and the material. Text and the creature, as actualized, physical constructions, appear to be the only viable reality in the absence of a responsive transcendent exteriority.

A second citation from Percy B. Shelley's "Mutability" is located at a point where the creature is asking important questions about his identity and his origins. He has been reading the books he has found in the "leathern portmanteau" during his stay in the hovel (FI 103). By providing new information, his reading furthers "the progress of . . . [his] intellect" (FI 103) and encourages self-examination: "I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike the beings concerning whom I read" (FI 103). He identifies in many ways with human beings, but at that point, being "uninformed in mind" (FI 104), he does not entirely understand them. His deprivation of familial and social relations, moreover, sensed strongly throughout the course of his reading, evokes feelings of alienation. "The path of my departure was free", relates the creature, citing (and altering) a line from "Mutability." "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred" (FI 104). The citation is unobtrusive but significant. The original lines from the poem are in the final stanza, cited by Victor in the episode on Montanvert: "It is the same!--For, be it joy or sorrow,/The path of its departure still is free" (ll. 13-14). In the source poem, joy and sorrow are equally likely possibilities: "The path of its departure still is free" because humans are capable of experiencing either "joy or sorrow" and cannot predict when things change but only that they will. The creature's altering of the line so that it becomes "The path of my departure was free" (emphasis mine) implies that his activity, his entire existence, is as arbitrary and unpredictable as human suffering or happiness. At the same time, in this instance of fundamental questioning about who or

what he is, the creature cites text in the absence of explanation, as when in the earlier Montanvert episode, Victor makes reference to literature, indeed to the same poem, as a response to a lack of rational understanding about central questions of existence. Comparable to Percy Shelley's metaphor for the poet as "a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer his own solitude" (Defence, Perkins 1075), Victor's and the creature's use of citation is a way to express one's feelings and think about one's experiences when existential alienation seems to deny the significance of their concerns.

Victor's description of Clerval, his "slight tribute to the unexampled worth of Henry" (FI 130), is another point where a citation of verse appears. Victor begins by describing Clerval as "a being formed in the 'very poetry of nature,'" citing the phrase from Leigh Hunt's The Story of Rimini (1816) (2:47). According to Victor, Clerval's "enthusiastic imagination" was tempered with a warm heart, and he "loved with ardour" the "scenery of external nature" (FI 130). To illustrate Clerval's temperament, he follows with an excerpt from Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (ll. 77-83):

> ---The sounding cataract
> Haunted him like a passion: the tall rock,
> The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms, were then to him
> An appetite; a feeling, and a love,
> That had no need of a remoter charm,
> By thought supplied, or any interest

Unborrowed from the eye. (FI 130)

Shelley has characteristically altered the citation from the original which stands as "Haunted me like a passion" (l. 78), to suit the narratorial point of view. Victor's comparison of Clerval to the Wordsworthian persona who is at the stage of overwhelming passions underscores the affective similarity of the two contexts: both are nostalgic remembrances of past sensations; they also provide a distinct image of Clerval as Victor perceived him.

But it is the way the citation is couched in the text that is significant. Although it celebrates the virtue of the deceased Clerval, it is immediately followed by Victor's unsettling questions about the whereabouts of his friend:

> And where does he now exist? Is this gentle and lovely being lost for ever? Has this mind so replete with ideas, imaginations fanciful and magnificent, which formed a world, whose existence depended on the life of its creator; has this mind perished? Does it now only exist in my memory? No, it is not thus . . . your spirit still visits and consoles your unhappy friend. (FI 130)

Victor is disturbed by the notion that there is no locus of Clerval: "the mind that created a world" is absent. His fear is based on his understanding of a strictly physical reality, far removed from Wordsworth's view of a natural world where with "harmony" and a "deep power of joy" it is possible to "see into the life of things" (ll. 48-49). In fact, nature is "curiously implicated" in Clerval's death because it

> does not protect Clerval from its own malignant possibilities. It contains more than sounding cataracts and sublime mountains: there are also unaccommodated monsters and disseminated pieces of monstrous creation. (Brooks 216)

Victor's materialist conception makes it impossible, except by wistful sentiment, to posit Clerval's metaphysical existence. The excerpt, although rich in description and feeling is an inadequate stand-in for Clerval--underlying the body of Victor's text there is Henry's absence, and what remains is only Victor's anxiety. He pursues these reflections with an apology for his "gush of sorrow"; he explains that "ineffectual words" do not do Clerval justice, but they help him deal with his own pain: "they soothe my heart, overflowing with the anguish which his remembrance creates" (FI 130). The words are "ineffectual" in more than one sense; their inadequacy to express the brilliance of Henry is clear. But the written text is also "ineffectual" because, as a material construction, it heightens his awareness of the distance between himself and Clerval, who is no longer part of physical reality and may be "lost forever" (FI 130).

In Frankenstein, there is no evidence of the existence of a transcendent realm: the mind is incapable of penetrating the mysteries of fundamental questions, even though Victor is capable of physically "bestowing animation upon lifeless matter" (FI 34). Consequently, knowledge is acquired through experience in the world, and through a multitude of textual sources. While language and texts are problematic, since

> language never can overcome the gap [between ideas and objects because] . . . the chain established has no privileged limits, no mode of

> reference, but signifies purely as a chain, a system or series in which everything is mutually interrelated and interdependent but without any transcendent signified (Brooks 220)

linguistic expression nonetheless appears to be the only alternative to the absence of meaning that cannot be affirmed in any authoritative way. In Shelley's novel, nature, "the regulatory principle of life . . . refuses to offer any ethical principle" (Brooks 217). The key embedded quotations in Frankenstein all arise from and point to emotional emptiness caused by the absence of meaning. Yet, as part of the "chain" of linguistic signifiers, texts constitute a mutually shared textual culture that fills the void of insignificance and allows for meaningful communication.

2.2 The Mathilda Question

Mary Shelley composed the novella Mathilda, the tentative draft version of which was entitled The Fields of Fancy, in 1819, during an agonizing period of grief and depression following the death of her young son William. The text explores the phenomenon of incestuous desire, and in so doing, aligns itself with the large body of Romantic works fascinated in various ways by such a conventionally illicit and unusual form of human passion. Both Percy Shelley and Lord Byron had a great interest in the symbolic significance of incest. "Far from condemning this sort of love as unnatural, the [male] Romantics seemed bent on elevating it into an ideal" (Brown 212). While

Mary was writing Mathilda, Percy was finishing The Cenci, which also deals with father-daughter incest.[7]

The novella was first published in 1959 by Elizabeth Nitchie, but later went out of print until Bennett and Robinson's inclusion of it in The Mary Shelley Reader (1990). It is in the form of a letter written by Mathilda to her friend Woodville, a poet, yet it is more accurately a personal journal directed to the general public, since Woodville is referred to throughout in the third person. The letter consists of Mathilda's confession of her dark secret: that her father, who had left her as an infant to be raised by an aunt after his wife's death, comes back only to find that what existed as an idealizing adoration of his abandoned child has become an incestuous longing that Mathilda forces him to confess, and that leads to his suicide and to her own pining for death.[8]

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[7] Percy Shelley believed incest to be a "violation of the laws of society and thus 'incorrect,' not a violation of the laws of human nature and hence unnatural" (Brown 213). Shelley's works, particularly Laon and Cythna (later The Revolt of Islam) demonstrate that, for the poet, incest is important. In Laon and Cythna, one of Shelley's aims is to celebrate ideal romantic love between a man and a woman who are siblings. In The Cenci, the Count's crime "is not incest per se but incest done to wound, degrade, defile--an act committed out of hatred, not love" (Brown 213). For Percy Shelley, incest between siblings symbolizes the most exalted sexual love, in which two similar individuals are inextricably linked.

[8] Mellor explains that in all the literary sources from which Shelley drew, Mathilda is the forbidden sexual partner. In Dante's Purgatorio, Mathilda is the Pilgrim's last temptation before his encounter with Beatrice. Also in the Gothic tradition, Mathilda is usually the name of the "forbidden woman". In Lewis's The Monk (1796), Mathilda is an associate of the devil who seduces the monk, Ambrosio (Monsters, 195-197).

The unusual occurrences depicted in the novella are puzzling. As in Frankenstein, the turningpoint of the narrative is one enigmatic event. In her father's eyes, Mathilda is an ideal person, and his initial adoration is, seemingly, strictly paternal. He explains to her: "your beauty, artlessness, and untaught wisdom seemed to belong to a higher order of beings" (MT 208). Their immediately close relationship seems to fulfil all of Mathilda's dreams of their long-awaited meeting. She writes: "My imagination hung upon the scene of recognition . . . and I imaged the moment . . . a thousand times . . . his first words constantly were, 'My daughter, I love thee!'" (MT 185).

In an ironic twist of the plot, it is those very words that bring about their mutual destruction. Mathilda's father becomes increasingly withdrawn and moody. Hurt, disappointed, and utterly baffled by his sudden coldness, Mathilda decides to invite an open discussion about his feelings. Persistent, and convinced that her "earnest love and deep sympathy must soothe . . . despair" (MT 199), she urges him to reveal his secret. Her father resists her, ordering her to stop pursuing the matter, with a warning that in his heart "there are secret thoughts working, and secret tortures" (MT 199). But Mathilda will not stop; she implores him to be honest with her, agonized by the thought that he may no longer love her. Their exchange becomes a rising crescendo of persistence and violent resistance, until it explodes into angry, irrevocable words. Mathilda explains:

> I leant against a tree, wildly raising my eyes to heaven. He began to answer with violence: 'Yes, yes, I hate you! You are my bane, my

> poison, my disgust! Oh! No!' And then his manner changed, and fixing his eyes on me with an expression that convulsed every nerve and member of my frame--'you are none of these; you are my light, my only one, my life.--My daughter, I love you!' (MT 201)

The episode is powerfully rendered, but it in many ways raises more questions than it answers. It is not clear why Mathilda's father's love becomes something other than paternal. Moreover, his love is not malicious or intended to hurt, and never at any point gets expressed in physical terms, yet it brings death and destruction: Mathilda rushes home and confines herself to her room, and her father runs away, speeds toward the storm-tossed sea, and is drowned.

In the novella, both characters are victims "and evoke pathos rather than horror" (Macpherson 173-74). Metaphors of natural disaster, sickness, and poison suggest that in the case of both Mathilda and her father, destruction has come from an external, unknown agent that is impossible to control or circumvent. Mathilda's father declares that he is "struck by the storm, rooted up, laid waste" (MT 200). Subsequent to his confession, he feels himself transformed and ill: "I have surely a new soul within me, and my blood riots through my veins: I am burnt up with fever" (MT 201). Mathilda feels poisoned by what has happened, and she writes:

> infamy and guilt were mingled with my portion; unlawful and detestable passion had poured its poison into my ears and changed all my blood, so that it was . . . a cold fountain of bitterness corrupted in its very source. (MT 229)

Mathilda blames herself for influencing the outcome of events: "I, foolish and presumptuous wretch! hurried him on until there was no recall, no hope"--although clearly the "enemy" had already taken hold (MT 197). She indicates that something more powerful than human will caused the tragic events: "My fate has been governed by necessity, a hideous necessity. It required hands stronger than mine" (MT 177). And in his letter, her father writes: "It is a strange link in my fate that without having seen you I should passionately love you" (MT 208). Yet, the attribution of the events to "fate" is unsatisfying on its own, and the reader is left wondering why Mathilda and her father are guilty for an unrealized, unactualized desire.

Critics have attempted to discern the meaning of the strange passion that develops between the two, and have made suggestions as to what it may symbolize.[9] But the point of Mathilda, as in Frankenstein, is precisely that there are, necessarily, no rational explanations within human reality. Evidence for this inference can be found in the generic metamorphosis that the work has undergone. Mary originally began the novella with a fanciful, Platonic-idealist framework. In the draft, a narrator (not Mathilda), racked by "hideous memories," recounts being visited by Fantasia, "a lovely spirit" (FF 90) who takes her into "some of the most sombre walks of the Elysian fields" (FF 91). In this area of the gardens are those "whose chief care is to acquired knowledged [sic] and virtue" (FF 92). These souls travel for centuries within this transcendent realm to learn "the mysteries of the universe" (FF 93). Their ultimate

[9] Mellor provides a reading that points to the relationship between father and daughter as a symbolic critique of relationships at the time, when young women were considered to be ideal mates for older men (Monsters 195).

destination is "another world fitted for the reception of beings almost infinitely wise" (FF 93).[10] The narrator is brought by Fantasia to Diotima, the "Prophetess" and "the instructress of Socrates" (FF 94). With Diotima are other souls, including Mathilda, "thoughtful and unhappy--her cheek was pale she seemed as if accustomed to suffer" (FF 95).

Mathilda is to tell her strange story to Diotima, in the company of these other spirits, with the narrator observing from a distance. Yet it is Diotima who begins with a lengthy lesson about the difficulty of untangling good from evil on earth. In an ironic and critical variation on Diotima's affirmative role in Plato, her speech is laden with troubled discussion of the problem of knowledge: "of the creation I saw an eternal chain of evil linked one to the other . . . [beginning with] the great whale who in the sea swallows and destroys multitudes" (FF 96). Diotima recounts how on earth she was often confused and had to admit to her ignorance:

> of the great secret of the universe I can know nothing--There is a veil before it . . . I will study the end of my being--oh thou universal love inspire me . . . . Such was the conclusion of my long wanderings I sought the end of my being & I found it to be knowledge itself . . . . (FF 98)

Diotima stops speaking, and Mathilda breaks the silence, gently insisting on the difficulties of living:

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[10] Nitchie's note points to similarities with the association of wisdom and virtue in Plato's Phaedo, the myth of Er in the Republic, and ideas of love and beauty in the Symposium (FF 103).

> If knowledge is the end of our being why are passions & feelings implanted in us that hurries [sic] us from wisdom to selfconcentrated misery & narrow selfish feeling? Is it a trial? (FF 99)

Mathilda struggles over the impossibility of explaining her tale of "dark & phre[n]zied passions" (FF 100), doubting her ability to communicate her story in that heavenly realm: "Are there in the peaceful language used by the inhabitants of these regions--words burning enough to pain the tortures of the human heart--Can you understand them?" (FF 100).

The final version of Mathilda is in the form of an extended letter that becomes, as in Frankenstein, a personal journal. By entirely discarding the Platonic framework explored in The Fields of Fancy, Mathilda allows the questions and concerns of Mathilda, now the narrator, to take a prominent place. The genre of the personal journal fittingly reflects Shelley's abandonment of metaphysical explanations. As Hunter indicates, its use signals an interest in large human questions:

> because a major function of autobiography (or more precisely of the journal keeping which preceded autobiography . . .) was to clarify for the autobiographer the patterns and meanings that could presumably be discovered by the close observation of the details of life, the epistemological function of first-person narrative was deeply imbedded in the form. (Hunter 45)

Shelley's employment of this genre corresponds to her open-ended, uncertain conclusions about why Mathilda's life takes such a strange turn. The text embodies the

belief that there is no ultimate truth--Mathilda goes through her life imagining a union between herself and her father--and ends with her inviting her own death and their reunion in a proposed other world. Her "vision is characterized by an austerity and brooding related to the inability to discern any rationale within human destiny" (Snyder 438). Fittingly, Mathilda declares at the beginning of her narration that "Oedipus is about to die" (MT 176). The allusion to the myth of Oedipus introduces not only the theme of incest, but the notion of the grand, unsoluble riddle.[11] By the end, neither Mathilda nor her readers are any closer to understanding the strange events.

Toward the end of her life, Mathilda thinks about the earth after her passing, in a passage that reveals the underlying views about the limitations of human knowledge represented in the text. Addressing our "Universal Mother," she writes:

> The woods, and lakes, and mountains which I have loved, have for me a thousand associations . . . that sprung to life in my soul alone, and which will die with me . . . . You will exist to reflect other images in other minds, and ever will remain the same, although your reflected semblance vary in a thousand ways, changeable as the hearts of those who view thee. One of these fragile mirrors, that ever doted on thine image, is about to be broken, crumbled to dust. But ever teeming Nature

[11] For a detailed analysis of Shelley's use of the myth of Oedipus in Mathilda, see Katherine C. Hill-Miller (114-16).

> will create another and another, and thou wilt lose nought by my destruction. (MT 244)

Bennett and Robinson, citing Nitchie, include a footnote after this passage, written by Shelley, that appears in The Fields of Fancy but was omitted in the final version:

> "Dante in his Purgatorio describes a grifon as remaining unchanged but his reflection in the eyes of Beatrice as perpetually varying (Purg. Cant. 31). So nature is ever the same but seen differently by almost every spectator and even by the same at various times. All minds, as mirrors, receive her forms--yet in each mirror the shapes apparently reflected vary & are perpetually changing . . . ." (MT 244)

While Shelley cites Dante as the source for the mirror metaphor, it is clear that there is a deeper philosophical view informing the comparison. Striking analogies can be drawn between her metaphor of reflection and the work of the eighteenth-century German philosopher and mathematician Godfred William Leibnitz on theories of the universe and perspective. It is not likely that Shelley knew of Leibnitz's theories through primary sources, but was most probably familiar with them through William Enfield's (1791) popular encyclopedia of philosophy.[12]

Leibnitz differed from other philosophers on the issue of perspective, which had become of great concern in the Enlightenment. Unlike Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley, who do not explore personal identity as consciousness in their theories, and

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[12] Professor Christopher Heppner first suggested to me the similarities between Shelley's "mirror" passage and Leibnitz's monadology.

who "agreed with the perspective artist that the angle of vision, no matter how bizarre, ought to display to all observers the same visual array of objects" (Stempel 78), central to Leibnitz's conceptions of the universe is the individual point of reference. The "monad" is a system of "coordinated individual perspectives," each with a separate identity such that, although there is no real interaction between differing points of view, all perspectives "harmonize to form a single ordered universe" (Stempel 79). In Liebnitz's theory,

> every simple substance receives an impression or image of all the rest, and becomes, as it were, a perpetual living mirror of the universe . . . . [P]ictures of the universe are multiplied without end, according to the different points of sight of different Monads. (Enfield 563)

The similarity between Leibnitz's "perpetual living mirror of the universe" and Mathilda's description of individuals as "fragile mirrors" (MT 244) is strong. The importance of this comparison (regardless of the question of Shelley's direct or indirect familiarity with Liebnitz) is the way it illuminates Shelley's belief in subjectively experienced reality. In Mathilda, awareness of reality consists of experiencing one's own "reflection" of nature, distorted by individual perception that is "perpetually changing" (MT 244).

As in Frankenstein, writing has an important function within an incomprehensible world where meaning is relative. Considered as arbitrary and constructed significance, writing is problematic, yet it fills a painful gap of understanding. There is a distinctly "therapeutic value [in] . . . self-expression"

(Brewer 387), and this is seen in Mathilda's need to put her experience into words. She begins the letter to Woodville with her reasons for writing:

> Perhaps a history such as mine had better die with me, but a feeling that I cannot define leads me on and I am too weak both in body and mind to resist the slightest impulse. While life was strong within me I thought indeed that there was a sacred horror in my tale that rendered it unfit for utterance, and now about to die I pollute its mystic terrors. (MT 175-76)

The need to speak parallels Victor's desire to tell Walton his story of "great and unparalleled misfortunes" (FI 17), and together they both strongly echo Coleridge's ancient Mariner's urge to tell and retell his strange tale, which Mary had heard, recited by the poet himself, in her father's Skinner Street home.[13]

In her narrative it is evident that Mathilda displays a profound lack of a sense of personal significance and identity because of the inexplicable and devastating events. She claims, "I was in truth a marked creature, a pariah, only fit for death" (MT 239). Consequently, her autobiographical account becomes a consciously constructed

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[13] Her short story "The Transformation" takes as its epigraph an excerpt from Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, which relates the Mariner's need to communicate:

> Forthwith this frame of mine was wrench'd
> With a woful agony
> Which forced me to begin my tale,
> And then it set me free.
> Since then, at an uncertain hour,
> That agony returns;
> And till my ghastly tale is told
> This heart within me burns. (Brewer 392)

"tragic history" (MT 175), in which Mathilda, "wild, raving and most miserable" (MT 219), aligns herself with a tradition of tragic heroines and "struggles as a self-conscious tragic actress" (Bennett and Robinson vii). Much of this self-characterization is achieved by using embedded quotations, the majority of which invoke comparable literary figures. Through literary references, Mathilda tries to create a personal identity, and at the same time, drawing on readers' literary sensibilities, she attempts to engage their sympathetic understanding.

Mathilda's attachment to literary sources appears early in the narrative. Like Victor Frankenstein, his creature, and Robert Walton, she is an isolated figure who learns about life through books:

> Sometimes indeed I wept when my aunt received my caresses with repulsive coldness, and when I looked round and found none to love; but quickly dried my tears. As I grew older books in some degree supplied the place of human intercourse. (MT 184)

In her aunt's library she found "the strangely assorted poets of her collection" as well as the Roman historian Livy and Charles Rollin, who enjoyed much popularity in the eighteenth century (MT 184). For Mathilda, like Victor's creature, literature becomes a way of understanding the world and constructing her own experience. In her description of her isolated youth at her cold aunt's Scottish estate, she explains losing her beloved nurse, who was her only experience of human warmth: "I had no friend but her in the whole world," says Mathilda (MT 183). To illustrate her solitude, she

includes a citation from Wordsworth's "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" (which Shelley merely identifies as "Wordsworth"). She writes:

> I lived in a desolate country where
>
> ---there were none to praise
>
> And very few to love. (MT 183)

The poem is part of what are known as Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems. Although there is nothing "known as to the identity of 'Lucy,'" Coleridge notes that the origin of the figure and of the poems was "'some gloomier moment'" when Wordsworth "'had fancied the moment in which his sister [Dorothy] might die'" (Perkins 263). Mathilda identifies with Lucy on the basis of her tragic existence, and at the same time she also wants her reader to see her experience in these terms, bringing to her story the sense of innocence and loss represented by Lucy.

The use of citation to elicit sympathy and understanding is not only employed by Mathilda. In her father's letter written to "expiate these crimes" (MT 207), he explains his feelings and his need to leave, by using this device to the same ends. Tracing the roots of his idealization of Mathilda, he writes:

> Those divine lights which shone on me as did those of Beatrice upon Dante, and well might I say with him yet with what different feelings
>
> E quasi mi perdei con gli occhi chini
>
> Can you wonder, Mathilda, that I dwelt on your looks, your words, your motions, and drank in unmixed delight? (MT 208)

The source of the citation is Dante's Paradiso (4:142); the translation, provided by Bennett and Robinson, is: "And I almost lost myself with eyes downcast" (MT 208). Appealing to Mathilda's literary knowledge of Dante's immense love for Beatrice, he finds a way to convey the extent of his feelings and to rationalize the reasons for his vulnerability. To be understood, he must borrow Dantean images to categorize and define his feelings, which defy conventional sympathy and explanations. Furthermore, he is clearly constructing an image of Mathilda, in the same way that she does for herself throughout her account. "You appeared as the deity of a lovely region," he writes. "I dared hardly consider you my daughter" (MT 208). In a different sense, Mathilda too cannot simply see herself as her father's daughter. Damned by this role, she aligns herself with an entire league of fictional characters.

Describing her entrapment in the world after her father's death, being "the sole depository of my own secret" (MT 216), Mathilda again cites the words of a literary figure. She writes: "I dared not die even though the cold grave held all I loved; although I might say with Job" the following words:

> Where is now my hope? For my hope who shall see it?
>
> They shall go down together to the bars of the pit,
>
> when our rest together is in the dust. (MT 216)

Echoing the words of the Biblical Job, who is in many ways an emblem of human suffering, Mathilda finds consolation in the universality of this miserable condition. Job provides another literary model in the fictional community of tragic characters to which she imagines herself belonging. Mathilda's anti-social, suicidal feelings require

an explanation to maintain the reader's understanding and sympathy. Using illustrative literary references, Mathilda can justify her extreme response.

Further on, in another reference to Wordsworth, Mathilda achieves the same effect by identifying with the speaker's ardent wish for death:

> And morning and evening my tearful eyes raised to heaven, my hands clasped tight in the energy of prayer, I have repeated with the poet--
>
> Before I see another day
>
> Oh, let this body die away! (MT 221)

The source poem is Wordsworth's "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman," (2:1-2). Here Mathilda's fear of losing her reader's sympathy is more evident: "Let me not be reproached then with inutility . . . I thought that I sufficiently fulfilled my part in submitting to the hard task of enduring the crawling hours and minutes" (MT 221).

Mathilda's passionate references to literature stand in stark contrast to her statements about the falseness of art. In a significant episode, her awareness of the artificiality of textually-constructed meaning is made explicit. Mathilda's only friend, Woodville, provides an audience for Mathilda's suffering in more than one way: as a kind listener who fails to gain her complete confidence in life, but nonetheless visits and comforts her; as the recipient of this journal of her life; and importantly, as a metaphorical playgoer. Mathilda explains her frustration at feeling only temporarily comforted by Woodville: while his "words had magic in them" and he would lift her spirits, when he left, "despair returned" (MT 232). Angry at his inability to "drive the fiend from . . . [her] soul," Mathilda complains:

> I am, I thought, a tragedy; a character that he comes to see act: now and then he gives me my cue that I may make a speech more to his purpose: perhaps he is already planning a poem in which I am to figure. I am a farce and play to him, but to me that is all dreary reality: he takes all the profit and I bear all the burthen. (MT 233)

Mathilda's anguish brings her to the point of asking Woodville to commit suicide with her. Citing the words of Despair from Spenser's Faery Queene (1.9.40), where the Red Cross Knight is tempted before Una saves him, she tries to convince him:

> What if some little payne the passage have
> That makes frayle flesh to fear the bitter wave?
> Is not short payne well borne that brings long ease,
> And lays the soul to sleep in quiet grave? (MT 236)

"Do you mark my words; I have learned the language of despair: I have it all by heart, for I am Despair," announces Mathilda. She persists in her effort to gain Woodville's assent: "But those words are false," she says; "the wave may be dark but it is not bitter" (MT 236). The words are false in more than one way. While Mathilda's reference is to the falsity of the bitterness of death, it is also evident here that she sees the artificiality of all the art she calls upon to define herself. All is a fiction, one that is created to "give words to . . . [her] dark tale" (MT 239).

As in Frankenstein, the textual citations serve more ends than to indicate thematic links: they reflect Mathilda's own inability to understand her life and suffering in a world where knowledge comes only from subjective, distorted

impressions of nature, which, as in Frankenstein, do not yield any discernible answers to human questions. By associating her experiences with those of well-known figures in literature, Mathilda assigns some significance to her existence, albeit an arbitrary and artificial one. At the same time, she is writing to Woodville, who is a poet, just as Shelley writes for an audience of sympathetic and, in many cases, highly literate readers, and her invocation of literary characters and situations transforms her tale of "mystic terrors" (MT 176) into a coherent and moving "tragic history" (MT 175) for her readers.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LAST EXPERIMENT: THE LAST MAN (1826)

Weary of myself, and sick of asking
What I am, and what I ought to be,
At the vessel's prow I stand, which bears me
Forwards, forwards, o'er the starlit sea.

-Matthew Arnold, "Self-Dependence"
(1854)

3.1 "Sublime Fictions" and "Blank Reality"

Shelley's third full-length novel, The Last Man, which she wrote during the period 1824-26, has for "some time . . . been recognized," one critic noted in 1972, as "a creative landmark in Mary Shelley's career" (Walling 72). In an attempt to understand and classify the novel, critics point out that it is part of the outbreak of work on the theme of the last man during the last half of the Romantic movement. Cousin de Granville's The Last Man; or Omegarus and Syderia: A Romance of Futurity, which was translated in 1806, is thought to have begun the trend in English literature. This publication was followed by work like Byron's poem "Darkness" in 1816 and Thomas Campbell's poem "The Last Man" in 1824.[1] In Shelley's novel about the annihilation of all but one human being, the narrator is Lionel Verney, who, in the twenty-first

[1] Discussions of the last man theme can be found in de Palacio, Mellor, Spark, Snyder, and Nitchie.

century, helplessly observes the drastic changes in nature and the destruction of human society caused by a mysterious plague that sweeps the earth. Unable to assign meaning to such traumatic occurrences, he can resort only to writing an account of the events recently past, intended for the possible "offspring of the re-born world" (LM 437). Verney's account, the "Author's Introduction" makes clear, is one that the nineteenth-century "author" has pieced together and deciphered from ancient prophetic scribbles found on leaves that she/he[2] and a companion[3] have gathered and collected from the cave of the Cumaean Sibyl in Naples. While Lionel begins with the intent to write about the desolation and his desertion, he produces a lengthy narration that is as much memoir and autobiography as it is biography, history, romance, and philosophical treatise. A brief summary of Verney's narrative will facilitate discussion of the novel.

England in 2073 has become a republic after the abdication of the king. Verney is an orphaned shepherd, son of a man who was the king's close but later estranged friend. Alienated and alone in the hills and fields of Cumberland with his moody and introverted sister, Perdita, as his sole companion, he undergoes a complete change of life style and personality when he meets Adrian, the son of the now-deceased king. Adrian introduces Lionel to the world of books, where he learns about history, philosophy, and literature. Verney goes on to marry Adrian's sister, Idris, despite the antagonism of the former queen, and Perdita marries the politically-minded Lord

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[2] The "author's" gender is never made explicit.

[3] Past scholarship has tended to identify the author and companion as Mary and Percy Shelley, but the introduction does not conclusively support this speculation.

Raymond. The group live a quiet and happy life together until Raymond decides to become involved in politics again and becomes romantically involved with Adrian's former love interest, Evadne, a politically active Greek noblewoman. Raymond joins the Greek struggle for independence after Perdita rejects him for his betrayal of her love. When Raymond gets into danger in Greece, Perdita has a change of heart, and she and Lionel go to Greece to rescue him.

In the second volume, Raymond leads a successful campaign, conquering Constantinople, where plague has destroyed the city. There Raymond dies, and Perdita later commits suicide. The focus of the novel then becomes the spread of the deadly plague, which devastates the East, Europe, America, and Britain. Adrian, now Lord Protector, resolves to guide the group of British survivors to the Alps. In the third volume, he struggles to keep the group together when they encounter an evil cult leader and when the plague returns. By the time the group reaches Italy, the sole survivors are Adrian, Verney, his son Evelyn, and Raymond's and Perdita's daughter Clara. The deaths of all but Verney leave the former shepherd-turned-author to record his story and then to sail the world looking for human life.

At the time of The Last Man's publication, its perceived stylistic faults were the critics' reasons for condemning it as a novel not worth reading, a "decided failure" (The Monthly Review, March 333-35). It was criticized for its violation of expectations of acceptable subject matter, coherent plot, sense of realism, and character portrayal. Shelley had expected a much more positive critical assessment. In fact, the novel's reception made her forever wary of venturing into the "wild" and

"imaginative." "'Composition is delightful,' she declared, 'but if you do not expect the sympathy of your fellow creatures . . . the pleasure of writing is of short duration'" (Walling 80-81).

Anne K. Mellor's examination of the novel leads her to declare it a "sweeping critique of the Romantic poetic ideology promoted by Percy Bysshe Shelley, Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth (Mellor, Introduction xviii). Similarly, Morton D. Paley, finds that The Last Man is

> culminating a tradition in which Omegarus and Syderia and "Darkness" are prominent, [and] denies the linkage of apocalypse and millennium that had previously been celebrated in some of the great works of the Romantic epoch, perhaps most fully in Prometheus Unbound. (Paley, "Apocalypse" 7)

Paley's introduction to the latest edition of the novel (Oxford World's Classics, 1994) locates one of The Last Man's major thematic preoccupations specifically in the failure of the imagination as conceived and exalted by Romantic poets. In the novel, the imagination is "merely a creator of deceptive fantasies," whereas in the "works of the great Romantic poets . . . the imagination is a creative and even a redemptive agency" (Paley, Introduction xi).

Indeed, more emphatically than in any of her other fiction, Shelley here rejects the notion of the creative imagination, with its philosophical underpinning of organicism--the interconnectedness of the divine, the natural world, and the mind--and its implicit faith in creative originality. The novel, like Frankenstein and Mathilda,

develops a view of the imagination that is bound by the physical world, and by the mind's limited ability to gain access to knowledge. In Lionel's universe, as in Victor's and Mathilda's, there is "no sovereign God and no supernatural agency" (Paley, "Apocalypse" 7). And, as in Frankenstein and Mathilda, the fictional world is haunted by one pivotal event that remains entirely enigmatic. The deadly plague and its effects come without any indication of a cause and do not bring apocalypse or closure. In The Last Man, the reason for the disaster is "chillingly indeterminate" (Paley, "Apocalypse" 21). As Snyder argues, "there is no logically adequate way of construing the plague" (436). Furthermore, the destruction wrought by the plague not only levels human life but deflates the importance of scientific progress, knowledge, and artistic achievement:

> Farewell to the giant powers of man--to knowledge that could pilot the deep-drawing bark through the opposing waters of shoreless ocean,--to science that directed the silken balloon through the pathless air . . . . Farewell to the arts, --to eloquence, . . . farewell to poetry and deep philosophy, for man's imagination is cold . . . . (LM 321)

The point made in Shelley's novel is precisely the "mocking [of] all assumptions of order, meaning, purpose, causality," and the plague simply underscores the "limits of rational understanding" (Snyder 437). In The Last Man, Shelley formulates "a kind of proto-existentialism" that continues from "Frankenstein's inconclusiveness"--in this last experimental novel, Shelley's "vision is finally presented in completion" (Blumberg 117).

Most critical work on The Last Man has referred to the presence of Percy B. Shelley in analyzing the character of Adrian.[4] In the novel, Adrian, the son of the former king of England, appears as the idealistic, visionary intellectual whose politics clearly echo those espoused by Percy Shelley. He "was addicted to study, and imbued beyond his years with learning and talent: report said that he had already begun to thwart his mother's views, and to entertain republican principles" (LM 20). Lionel's first encounter with Adrian occurs when the latter leaves Windsor and goes to the family estate in Cumberland, where Verney and Perdita spend their isolated youth. Verney has just been caught poaching on Adrian's land, in a rebellious attempt at revenge for the late king's supposed rejection of his father. Adrian appears, as Verney, who is "haggard and squalid," looking like "the merest ruffian that ever trod the earth," struggles with two gamekeepers in a bloody fight. Lionel is befriended by Adrian, who recognizes him and claims their "hereditary bond of friendship" (LM 26). In Lionel's later narration, he insists that Adrian's virtues far surpassed those of the average person: "his sensibility and courtesy fascinated every one" (LM 26), and that he was "deep read and imbued with the spirit of high philosophy":

> he seemed like an inspired musician, who struck, with unerring skill, the 'lyre of mind,' and produced thence divine harmony. In person, he

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[4] Traditionally, critics have seen The Last Man as a memorial to Mary Shelley's then deceased spouse. Hugh J. Luke remarks that Shelley was not able "to write or publish a formal biography of her late husband because of her promise to Sir Timothy [her father-in-law], [but] Mary had been able to memorialize Shelley by portraying him, in fictional guise, in The Last Man. Shortly after the novel appeared she alluded to this in . . . a letter. . . .'I have endeavoured,' she wrote, 'but how inadequately, to give some idea of him in my last published book'" (Luke, Introduction xi).

> hardly appeared of this world; his slight frame was overinformed by the soul that dwelt within; he was all mind . . . . (LM 26-27)

The result of the friendship between the two men is more than a change in Lionel from "vagabond shepherd" and "unlettered savage" (LM 30) to a simple, peace-loving student. Lionel tells the reader that his lawless years of poaching and troublemaking ended when his benevolent captor, Adrian, introduced him to a universe of intellectual pursuits, Adrian's "own paradise of order and beauty" (LM 157). Lionel claims that initially he was absorbed in the new world shown to him--"my sole companions were my books and my loving thoughts" (LM 77)--and that he was for all purposes "wedded to literature" (LM 157). Lionel's unquestioning faith in books--of philosophy, history, literature--without which "no man's faculties could be developed" (LM 157), leads him to a desire to be an author. In a significant passage, he presents the reader with a description of the creative process as he saw it:

> I sought the vast hills of the Castle, and looked over wide fertile England . . . . At such times solemn harmonies or spirit-stirring airs gave wings to my lagging thoughts, permitting them, methought, to penetrate the last veil of nature and her God, and to display the highest beauty in visible expression, to the understandings of men . . . . Then I would hasten to my desk, weave the new found web of mind in firm texture and brilliant colours, leaving the fashioning of the material to a calmer moment. (LM 157-58)

The idealism underlying the process as Verney describes it, the belief that his thoughts were able "to penetrate the last veil of nature and her God," is reminiscent of the Romantic poet's notions of creativity, as known through the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge but more specifically of Percy Shelley. Poetry, according to Percy, "strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms" (Defence, Perkins 1085).

Significantly, Lionel Verney, the writer of the lengthy prose account of the death of all humanity, is not the idealistic poet he claims to have been. His last written document approximates documentary-style reporting more than it does poetry. Lionel redefines the imagination as having no grasp of transcendence or a deeper understanding of human events. On the contrary, in his later formulations, the imagination only confuses the mind in its perception of physical reality. In a significant episode where Verney finds himself in flame-engulfed Constantinople, this view of the imagination is clearly demonstrated:

> the glare of the flames attested the progress of destruction, while, during mingled light and obscurity, the piles around me took gigantic proportions and weird shapes. For a moment I could yield to the creative power of the imagination, and for a moment was soothed by the sublime fictions it presented to me. The beatings of my human heart drew me back to blank reality. (LM 200)

Moreover, Lionel sees the "sublime fictions" the imagination spins out as the cause of early civilization's fears of the unexplained, and he assigns the same cause to the colorful language and images used by society to refer to the oncoming plague:

> in the beginning of the world, mankind clothed their enemies in impossible attributes--and . . . details proceeding from mouth to mouth . . . like Virgil's ever-growing Rumour . . . clasp Hesperus and Lucifer with her outstretched hands. Gorgon and Centaur, dragon and iron-hoofed lion, vast sea-monster and gigantic hydra, were but types of the strange and appalling accounts brought to London concerning our invaders. (LM 298)

Some readers have seen The Last Man as a tribute to Percy Shelley, "but it is an ironic one, a colossal monument to difficult and frustrating idealism" (Blumberg 114). Mary Shelley couples her critique of her husband's creative principles with an ongoing political critique: Percy's utopian-republican notions are seen to be completely ineffectual in the face of the plague that renders the government "impotent in the face of crisis" (Blumberg 114).

While Lionel has revisioned the conceptions of the imagination that he earlier adopted under Adrian's influence, he still considers writing to be an essential activity. He suggests that it is human nature to define, limit, and explain events because humans cannot be "as the cattle that . . . lie down at evening-tide, unknowing of the past, careless of the future, for from such fond ignorance alone canst . . . [they] hope for ease!" (LM 322). As Victor Frankenstein phrases it, humanity's "sensibilities"

"only [render] . . . them more necessary beings" (FI 75), but these qualities are integral to human nature. Verney's loneliness and lack of understanding force him to create a coherent record of events: "mellowing the lurid tints of past anguish with poetic hues, I am able to escape from the mosaic of circumstance, by perceiving and reflecting back the grouping and combined colouring of the past" (LM 268).

The script becomes increasingly important, both as a legacy for an imagined future race, and for the sake of Lionel's own need to write. But his narrative is hindered by the difficulty of capturing his experiences in language:

> could my hand write, or language afford words to express, the variety of our woe . . . . Patience, oh reader! whoever thou art . . . thou wilt here read of the acts of the extinct race . . . . (LM 399)

The sense of the inadequacy of language haunts Lionel as he is writing his "journal of death" (LM 267). He often doubts the possibility of giving an accurate description of what he has witnessed:

> while I shape the skeleton of my days--my hand trembles--my heart pants, and my brain refuses to lend expression, or phrase, or idea, by which to image forth the veil of unutterable woe that clothed these bare realities. (LM 465)

Ultimately Lionel's account, aware of "the very irrelevance of words and writing," becomes a "futile and impotent shout into the earless and eyeless void of the future" (Blumberg 117). The crisis of human significance here, as in the earlier texts, urges the narrator to assign meaning through language and writing, but clearly Lionel, like

Shelley's earlier narrators, is also aware that language is a relative, unstable locus of meaning. In The Last Man, "all cultural ideologies and human interactions rest on nonreferential signs . . . inherently figural . . . [and] no more stable or enduring than the mortal mind" (Mellor, Introduction xxii).

Nonetheless, for Verney, linguistic expression serves an important function: it constructs significance and establishes a link between people, enabling human relationships. While Lionel initially thinks that "'to read were futile--to write, vanity indeed'" (LM 308), writing provides him with an identity and a reason for living (Paley, "Apocalypse" 23). Beginning his account, he writes:

> DEDICATION
>
> TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD
>
> SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL!
>
> BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE
>
> LAST MAN. (LM 466)

Although Verney is not sure whether in fact anyone will exist again to read his account, he positions himself as a teacher of the supposed future reader, and sees his work as an instructional document, a "'monument of the foregone race'" (Snyder 23, LM 399). Furthermore, writing helps him to feel part of his lost community: "in writing his narrative, Verney rejoins, temporarily, all of the people he has loved" (Brewer 403). "They have been with me during the fulfillment of my task," he writes. "I lift my eyes from my paper--again they are lost to me" (LM 467). As a "monument" to a lost human race that nonetheless cannot provide any rational explanations for its

annihilation or for the significance of its existence, Verney's narrative relies heavily on the communitarian function of writing.

3.2 "These Poetic Rhapsodies": The Citations Proliferate

Mary Shelley's The Last Man is "self-consciously a text--written, fragmented, collated, translated and edited" (O'Dea 284), strongly aware of its own textual evolution and its struggle for form and expression. The introduction has usually been read in an attempt to understand the temporal logic of the novel. The illogical time frame has puzzled many critics. O'Dea has recently provided the clearest explanation: the introduction pre-dates Lionel's account of the future; that is, Lionel's story is a telling of past events that have not yet taken place (O'Dea 290-91). Because the introduction hinges on the supernatural, it is difficult and perhaps pointless to dwell on its illogical temporality. Reading the introduction as an overtly theoretical way of contextualizing Lionel's disturbing story allows us to speculate about its figurative significance and function in the novel.[5]

Shelley's reader's first encounter with Lionel's (and Shelley's) idiosyncratic practice of writing as combining and rearranging of materials takes place in the introduction:

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[5] Gilbert and Gubar interpret the cave as a symbol of the womb and the introduction as evidence of Shelley's recalling a feminine literary order (Madwoman 93-104).

> I present the public with my latest discoveries in the slight Sibylline pages. Scattered and unconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form. But the main substance rests on the truths contained in these poetic rhapsodies, and the divine intuition which the Cumaean damsel obtained from heaven. (LM 6)

We can see here Shelley's characteristic conflation of editing and authorship, rooted in the creative act as Shelley envisioned it. The "author" connects the "scattered" pages and "adds links," inventing out of "chaos" (FII 8). In The Last Man, the distinction between the acts of collating and creating is impossible to draw; it is not clear how much of the narrative that follows is Lionel's text and to what extent there have been creative editorial additions. Although the "author" humbly attributes the substance to the "divine intuition" of the Sybil, the process has been clearly one of physical manipulation of texts.

The "author's" reference to the text as "poetic rhapsodies" contributes significantly to an understanding of Lionel's narrative strategies. "Rhapsody" denotes "enthusiastic or extravagant utterance or composition" (Oxford 641), which Lionel's account clearly is, prompting critics to attack it for its "sentimentality" (Walling 73). But "rhapsody" has a rich and relevant etymology: the word stems from the Greek root "rhapto," which means to stitch; in the ancient world, "rhapsodes" were literally "song-stitchers," "professional reciters of poetry particularly of Homer but also of other poets" (Oxford Classical 919). Adapting and reciting works, rhapsodists came under

the scrutiny of the philosophers. In Plato's Ion, the rhapsode is presented as an inferior figure in comparison to the poet, who is inspired by the gods:

> The rhapsode belongs to the realms of imitation and of opinion: he professes to have all knowledge, which is derived by him from Homer, just as the sophist professes to have all wisdom, which is contained in his art of rhetoric. Even more than the sophist he is incapable of appreciating the commonest logical distinctions; he cannot explain the nature of his own art; his great memory contrasts with his inability to follow the steps of the argument. (Dialogues 101)

The "author's" reference to the novel's "poetic rhapsodies" also draws on this second, more ancient significance.

The text's rhapsodic quality results from in large measure Lionel's use of citations, which he has collected from different sources and included in his narrative. Lionel's narrative is highly aware of a vast body of literature that is "grafted" into the text. From the epigraph, which, as in Frankenstein, is an excerpt from Milton's Paradise Lost, to Petrarch, Shakespeare, Euripides, the Bible, Homer, Wordsworth, Ariosto, Schiller, Byron, Calderon de la Barca, Pope, Keats, Marvell, Beddoes, Cleveland, Wollstonecraft, Coleridge, and Percy B. Shelley, Lionel's narrative is full of the presence of other texts. Overturning the ancient negative associations of rhapsody, Shelley celebrates the patched or "sewn" quality of her text. The imagination, as Shelley shows in Lionel's disillusionment with fictional imaginings, art, and language, is grounded within the physical world. In The Last Man, knowledge

or inspiration does not come from a realm beyond the material; at best the author can draw on sentiments or feelings from sources written by others within the confines of a hostile world.

Gregory O'Dea, in his recent assessment of The Last Man as a novel informed by an interest in speculative history and historiography, claims that many of the aspects of the narrative should be understood as Shelley's way of undermining the hierarchy of poetry over prose that Percy Shelley establishes in his Defence of Poetry (written 1821, pub. 1840). According to the poet, "story" is simply detached facts having in common "'time, place, circumstance, cause, and effect,'" and it applies only to a specific period of time. "Poetry," on the other hand, is "'the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth'" (O'Dea 289). O'Dea asserts that Shelley's aim in The Last Man is to give the role of poetry to prose: to "offer distinction and immediacy, and to make history's actors, events, writers, and readers 'tremblingly alive' with 'eternal truth'" (O'Dea 289).

O'Dea's reading of the novel easily lends itself to an understanding of the presence of the large body of literary writing that riddles the text as part of an attempt to poeticize the story, thereby enhancing its universal relevance--its "eternal truth." However, such a reading fails to account for the way the novel consistently undercuts the premise of poetry's link with "truth" or an ideal realm beyond time and history. Shelley's narrator is a failed visionary poet who, baffled by a devastation that defies comprehension and highly conscious of the passing of time, becomes a recorder of history, a biographer, and a storyteller.

The function of the literary excerpts is not immediately evident; sometimes, as in the previous works, they are brief and seemingly trivial, at other times extensive with obvious thematic links. However, a careful reading elucidates their often puzzling use. As in Frankenstein and to a greater extent in Mathilda, the claustrophobia of the mind, due to its entrapment within physical reality, is mirrored in Lionel's and the novel's preoccupation with recalling and reusing older literature in the face of the grand enigma of a killer plague. He cannot derive "truth" from nature, and the sources with which he is familiar and which he cites are all, the novel implies, simply artifacts of human experience within an incomprehensible world. But in The Last Man, where there is a concern with conveying a sense of the human ethos, as the narrative traces the demise of the human race, the numerous quotations drawn from the vast tradition of literature also stand as the products of a shared human experience. The same sentiments and situations are shown to recur, and to be common to all people, assuming (and constructing) in the reader a sympathy and an understanding based on the universality of human experience.

The letter of explanation that Perdita writes to Raymond, as a consequence of their recent estrangement, contains two embedded quotations. The letter is precipitated by Raymond's secretive behavior throughout his ongoing communication with Evadne, the Greek noblewoman who has returned to England. Detailing Perdita's feelings of love and her subsequent disillusionment, it begins with a description of the idyllic love that she experienced with Raymond: "Love for you invested the world for me in enchanted light; it was no longer the earth I trod--the earth commc.. mother, yielding

only trite and stale repetition of objects and circumstances old and worn out" (LM 142). Perdita recounts that she lived in "a temple glorified" by "devotion and rapture," and she cites an excerpt (which she does not identify) from Coleridge's version of Schiller's The Death of Wallenstein (1800):

> For O, you stood beside me, like my youth,
> Transformed for me the real to a dream,
> Clothing the palpable and familiar
> With golden exhalations of the dawn. (LM 142)

Continuing with another line from Schiller's play, she adds: "The bloom has vanished from my life" (LM 142). The lines are also drawn from Coleridge's translation (5.1: 62-66). Wallenstein, duke of Friedland, is speaking with his sister-in-law, the Countess Tertsky. Wallenstein is lamenting the death of Piccolomini, Colonel of a Regiment of Cuirassiers. As is often the case, Shelley has altered the original source material to suit her context. Speaking of Piccolomini, Wallenstein tells the Countess "he stood beside me, like my youth" (emphasis mine). Despite the Countess's plea for him to "look forward into sunny days" of victory, Wallenstein is tormented by his loss. He concludes his bitter speech with the declaration that "[t]he beautiful is vanished--and returns not" (5.1:68).

Similarly, Perdita laments the breach of intimacy between herself and Raymond. She thinks in the same polarized terms as Wallenstein: "the earth common mother" is opposed with "a temple gloried by . . . devotion" (LM 142). While Wallenstein grieves over a literal death, Perdita describes the loss of Raymond's

exclusive affections as a death. It is one for which she could never cease to grieve, even after her own demise. "Even in Paradise," she writes, "I must feel that your love was less enduring than the mortal beatings of my fragile heart, every pulse of which knells audibly '. . . The funeral note/Of love, deep buried, without resurrection'" (LM 143). The second citation she includes (which, again, is not identified) is from Byron's Werner; or, the Inheritance (1822), and it furthers the association made between love and death. Gabor, hidden by Werner in a secret passage, thinks in soliloquy about the passing of time as he is evading his pursuers. The "never-merry clock," says Gabor, is "a perpetual knell/Though for a marriage feast it rings: each stroke/Peals for a hope the less; the funeral note/ Of love deep-buried without resurrection/In the grave of Possession" (3.3:6-10).

It is clear that within the context of Perdita's letter, the reason for the inclusion of these citations is affective. Perdita is writing to impress upon Raymond the extent of her feelings of love and the bitter emptiness she is experiencing because of the collapse of her ideal. But Perdita's letter is also an example of the effect that the novel creates throughout: that of shared sentiment. Wallenstein's lament and Gabor's night-thoughts in the secret passage both echo Perdita's loss. They embody alternate expressions of the same sentiment, and their inclusion in Lionel's own narrative of loss and grief increases the number of voices from the past that resound in the narrative.

Further on in his account, Verney describes the warning he gave Perdita about her treatment of Raymond, before Raymond's departure to fight in Greece. Here another verse citation appears. He says that in "one of her harshest moments a

quotation of mine had roused her to anger and disdain" (LM 169). Recalling his exact words to his sister, he writes:

> 'Perdita,' I had said, 'some day you will discover that you have done wrong in again casting Raymond on the thorns of life. . . . when a soldier's hardships have bent his manly form, and loneliness made even triumph bitter to him, then you will repent; and regret for the irreparable change
>
> 'will move
>
> In hearts all rocky now, the late remorse of love.' (LM 169)

These lines originate from the Fourth Canto of Byron's Childe Harolde (ll. 1232-3), and as Paley points out they are "the last lines of the so-called 'Forgiveness Curse' (LM 474). Shelley has altered "and" in Byron's version to "will" to suit the context. The Childe Harolde stanza from which this citation is drawn ends as follows:

> My mind may lose its force, my blood its fire,
> And my frame may perish even in conquering pain;
> But there is that within me which shall tire
> Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire;
> Something unearthly, which they deem not of,
> Like the remembering tone of a mute lyre,
> Shall on their soften'd spirits sink, and move
> In hearts all rocky now the late remorse of love. (ll. 1226-33)

The use of this excerpt furthers what has always been seen by critics as the direct comparison between the fictional Lord Raymond and Lord Byron. However, this citation is also an instance in which the universality of the sentiment is underscored. Lionel writes, "The stinging 'remorse of love' now pierced her heart" (LM 169), assuming that from the verse excerpt he has included, his point can be understood in its full significance. There is no attempt to describe Perdita's particular feelings; instead, a borrowed, descriptive phrase about love and remorse is referred to in a type of literary shorthand. Taken from another source and "recycled" (or edited) to apply to Perdita's case without explanation or elaboration, the full meaning of the phrase is assumed to be readily accessible to the reader.

Lionel's literary shorthand runs throughout his story. Citing Shakespeare's Othello ("Man but a rush against Othello's breast/And he retires" [5.2:270-1]), he writes, introducing Adrian: "'Man but a rush against' his breast, and it would have conquered his strength" (LM 27). Later on, citing an excerpt from Shakespeare's Sonnet 29 (ll. 11-12), Lionel explains that Adrian, when provided with a "worthy theme," is "[l]ike to the lark at break of day arising/From sullen earth, sing[ing] . . . hymns at heaven's gate" (LM 247). Citing Keats's "Sleep and Poetry" (ll. 251-52), Verney describes spring from Windsor Terrace. The "tender growth of leaves," "[l]ifts its sweet head into the air, and feeds/A silent space with ever sprouting green" (LM 274). The "recycling" of texts, the possibility and practice of taking material from one textual context and inserting it, with minor alterations, into another, while maintaining the feelings, sentiments, or ideas expressed in the original, contributes to the notion

that stories are universal and cyclical. The vast body of extant human writing is ultimately the same story of human life in this world retold by different people.

Verney's account comes to an ends when he finds there is nothing more to write. Haunted by his loneliness, he sails away, with only books to keep him company:

> Thus around the shores of deserted earth, while the sun is high, and the moon waxes or wanes, angels, the spirits of the dead, and the ever-open eye of the Supreme, will behold the tiny bark, freighted with Verney--the LAST MAN. (LM 470)

His references to angels, spirits, and a Supreme being are meaningless in Lionel's fictional world, and the events he describes make a mockery of the possibility that metaphysical powers guide human destiny. "Far from being a triumphant indication of self-transcendence and poetic imagination, his closing statement indicates he has failed to understand the condition of his Lastness" (Paley, "Apocalypse" 24). "My person, with its human powers and features, seems to me a monstrous excresence of nature" (LM 467), Lionel writes toward the end of his story. Yet he has succeeded in producing a manuscript that has temporarily brought him closer to the extinct companions who he reports, "have been with me during the fulfilment of my task" (LM 466). Verney also brings his readers closer to him, and to each other, by way of textual citations, which establish common grounds of reference and understanding in a tale containing "woe [that] human being until this hour never knew" (LM 467).

CONCLUSION:

"THE BEAUTIES OF ALL"

Mary Shelley's experimental fiction thematically and textually explores her materialist-based views of human existence. In her writing, hope in a realm of meaning beyond sensory perception is almost always the result of a need for comfort in the face of an incomprehensible natural system. This notion is demonstrated in her essay "On Ghosts," published in the London Magazine (1824):

> There is something beyond us [of] which we are ignorant. The sun drawing up the vaporous air makes a void, and the wind rushes in to fill it.--thus beyond our soul's ken there is an empty space; and our hopes and fears . . . occupy a vacuum . . . it bestows on the feeling heart a belief that influences do exist to watch and guard us, though they be impalpable to the coarser faculties. (Bennett and Robinson 336)

Shelley's fiction, characterized by its inclusion of different generic elements, is the product of a philosophy of literary creation that is committed to materialist claims about the nature of human knowledge. Although written during the Romantic period and often conceived in dialogue with some of the most popular writers and literature of the time, it eschews idealist, organicist notions upheld by major Romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Percy B. Shelley.

Mary Shelley's belief that knowledge is a product of experience in the world as well as received information manifests itself in her works in a heightened awareness

of literary texts, which are included by way of embedded quotations and citational snippets. Critical readings of Shelley's works have continued to neglect an adequate consideration of this feature, even though its prevalence in her texts makes it difficult to overlook. The present study, in addition to reflecting on Shelley's textual strategies and their ideological and philosophical roots, has demonstrated that the "grafting" of citations has important effects in her fiction. In Frankenstein, quotations underscore existential alienation by pointing to the need for texts to fill in the lacunae of human understanding; in Mathilda, the narrator uses citations to create a sense of personal identity; and in The Last Man, citations are used with the underlying assumption that they are shared pockets of meaning belonging to the community of human readers.

In considering the aesthetic and critical values that Shelley's texts uphold, this thesis adheres to Shelley's own model of creativity, which rejects "objective" systems of critical assessment as ineffective in appreciating the uniqueness and innovation of individual works. In "Giovanni Villani," printed in The Liberal (1823), Shelley emphasizes that we must "admire the beauties of all [works], referring those beauties to the standard of excellence that must decide on all merit in the highest resort, without reference to narrow systems and arbitrary rules" (Bennett and Robinson 329). Considering Shelley's experimental fiction "without reference to narrow systems and arbitrary rules" in the present study has facilitated a greater understanding of the underlying creative principles that produced texts that have been marginalized because of their "unusual" textual characteristics.

In Mary Shelley's review of Lord Normandy's "The English in Italy," which was published in the Westminster Review (1826), she remarks on authorial experimentation with genre:

> it is impossible to select any form of journal, letter or narrative which will combine the mass in an intelligible form and cause the reader to seize, as the author did, the conclusions to be drawn from such multifarious materials. (Bennett and Robinson 343)

Shelley's frustration with conventional generic categories is as clear in this passage as it is in her fiction. While conventional theories of "the novel" conceive it as a distinct form with an identifiable "emergence," many novels resist this formal definition. The eighteenth-century and Romantic novel, in its incorporation of other genres, was considered by novelists to be an inclusive genre that in itself breaks down the barriers of generic categories. Shelley's ease with the notion of combining "multifarious materials" is an indication that she was not bound by formal notions of the genre. Her uninhibited use of citations--often omitting authors and titles as well as altering the sources to suit the context--points to her idea that texts (and also genres) are malleable and changeable, not stagnant and fixed. Although Shelley's novels, except for the phenomenally popular Frankenstein, have been generally seen as "failed" novels, this supposed failure very largely reflects the extent of their experimentation with the form. Often "'failures' are characteristic of the species, even definitive" (Hunter 29). It remains up to critical theory to overturn its own stagnant and fixed ideas about "the novel," in order to continue to democratize the study of novels.

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