

Mary Shelley and her creations:

To thrill of life is to kill

Mary Shelley's creations include her writings, the most well-known of which, Frankenstein, is the source of this paper. Additionally in another sense, Mary Shelley was herself a creation – having been born of a woman who died ten days later of puerperal sepsis. Furthermore, Mary was herself a procreator – giving birth at age 18 to a premature infant – a daughter who died four days later.

These tragic events – the death of her mother and the death of her first born daughter – provided the idea for my subtitle: To thrill of life is to kill. From a psychoanalytic perspective this statement constitutes an unconscious logic that – I will argue here – was a constant undercurrent that pursued her throughout her life – and surfaced in many ways to contribute to the formation of certain symptoms.

One such symptom – what to call it?- not quite a nightmare, not quite a waking dream – rather more a hypnogogic vision - provided the inspiration for the novel, Frankenstein - the tale of an ambitious student of both science and the mystic arts, Victor Frankenstein, who stitches together of dead body parts, a human form that he succeeds in bringing to life. When the creature stirs, he is horrified and abandons it. All the creature's attempts to enter the human world are thwarted, and this transforms him into a

vengeful monster. Creator and abandoned creature are then intertwined in a destiny that carries both their deaths.

The creator-creature pair serves as a vehicle for Mary Shelley to tap her inmost experiences and convey to the reader an astonishing insight into the human condition. The monster – far from being the barely coherent guttural creature portrayed in film by Boris Karloff – emerges astutely aware of a fate that he poignantly articulates.

The circumstances of the novel's origins are well known to the literati – they bear repeating here: In the summer of 1816 – Mary and Percy Shelley – the two having eloped two years previous – were invited by Lord Byron to spend the summer at the Villa Dorati on the shores of Lake Geneva in Switzerland. They were accompanied by Dr. Polidori, Byron's personal physician, Mary's step-sister, Clair Clairmont, a constant companion of the Shelly's and their 6 month old infant, William.

To their consternation the weather was miserable and to pass the time and to entertain themselves in the face of the incessant rain they fell to reading Gothic novels and telling eerie ghost stories. Polidori came up with the idea that each would write a ghost story – and so they all fell to it. Alas, each morning when they inquired of Mary how she was progressing, she “was forced to reply in a mortifying negative . . . Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances but cannot bring into being the substance itself.”

Then one evening the group stayed long into the night discussing various notions and stories. One topic was galvanism, the application of electricity to dead creatures with the aim of bringing them to life. They turned to themes of various Gothic novels. Mary's

recollection of these tales will introduce to the style of her writing, “There was the History of the Inconstant Lover, who, when he thought to clasp the bride to whom he had pledged his vows, found himself in the arms of the pale ghost of her whom he had deserted.... There was the tale of the sinful founder of his race whose miserable doom it was to bestow the kiss of death on all the younger sons of his fated house. . . Eternal sorrow sat upon his face as he bent down and kissed the forehead of the boys, who from that hour withered like flowers snapped upon the stalk.” She concluded, “I have not seen these stories since then, but their incidents are as fresh in my mind as if I had read them yesterday.”

Her commentary testifies to the vividness of her imagination and indeed on retiring, her sleep was disrupted by imagery that went “beyond the usual bounds of reverie.” She reports that, “I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion. Frightful must it be, for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. He would hope that . . . this thing which had received such imperfect animation would subside into dead matter. . . . He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold, the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes. . . . I opened mine in terror.”

Her initial horror at this vision gave way to exaltation, “I knew I had my story.” She exclaimed to herself – and went on to elaborate this vision into the novel we know today as “Frankenstein.” Years later – at age 31 - in a second introduction, for a new

publication of “Frankenstein,” she put to herself the question: “How [could it have been that] I, then a young girl, came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea.”

Now, we are interested in the source of her horror. I propose that the topics of that evenings’ discussion served as a day residue – as a container to house what surged up from her unconscious that provoked a horrific encounter with a Real that had been inscribed within her, namely an uncanny thing come from the dead. If this is so then the novel, “Frankenstein” – served Mary as an extended interpretation of her “vision.” I will refer to it as her nightmare i.e. as if it were a dream with the point of horror marking its navel. Her wonderful word, “dilate” suggests a flow of thought that swirls upward as a vortex whose tip is the navel.

So her dilation is dream-work – but what is it working upon? Let’s highlight certain elements of the dream. The student of unhallowed arts goes beyond the limits. He becomes a Creator who uses as the substance for his creation disarticulated and scattered body parts gleaned from wretched sites: graveyards and charnel houses. This ensemble of fragments is pieced and stitched together and then animated by an assiduously constructed engine that suffuses it with electrical energy.

We note in passing, that in the parlance of that time, the word “engine” was a slang term for penis. So the labor of creation is linked to sexual procreation. Finally there is an abrupt shift from the absorbing work of piecing together and animating the body to horror at having succeeded to a plane reserved for God alone. Having overstepped this boundary, he withdraws hoping that the engendered spark of life will die out. Having abandoned his creation, he is plagued by the question, “What have I wrought?”

And could not Mary have likewise asked herself, “What have I wrought?” Certainly at the time of her birth she could not have known that her birth led to the demise of her mother – the well known Mary Wollstonecraft. She would learn of her mother’s fame as the first feminist writer – by reading the “Vindication of the Rights of Women,” that Wollstonecraft authored.

William Godwin, Mary’s father, was equally famous for his authorship of a work entitled “Political Justice” and later for an essay entitled “Justification of the Rights of Man.” But as the ideas they contained derived from the French revolution, he came to be attacked by the anti-Jacobins, who feared that the Jacobin excess during the Reign of Terror would spread to England.

Shortly after Mary Wollstonecraft’s death, William wrote, “Memoir of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Women.” Far from being the memorial it suggested, it was a scandalous revelation that brought down the opprobrium of the public who had recently lionized him. For William, being at heart straightforward to a fault, reveals all in this memoir, including the facts that Wollstonecraft’s first born daughter, Fanny, was a bastard, and that his infant daughter, Mary, was conceived out of wedlock.

Incongruously, William whose idiosyncratic views about society included a wish to demolish the institution of marriage – as being simply another form of autocratic power, did marry Wollstonecraft in order to legitimize Fanny and Mary by bestowing the name of Godwin upon them.

When informed that his wife had died Godwin dispassionately inquired, “Upon what facts is that assertion made?” He then entered the room in which she lay, went to

her bedside, knelt there and wept briefly. He wept just that one time, stating that “one ought not to indulge in emotional excess. One must carry on.”

He then fell to working upon that ill-destined memorial to his wife, and onto his newborn daughter he transferred his affection and also his need. Godwin memorialized his wife in other ways. In a prominent place in that destitute home he hung a portrait of Wollstonecraft by William Opie that the artist gave him after her death. Wollstonecraft was portrayed as the rebellious vivacious auburn haired woman she was. Opie departed from the style of the day – representing her clad in a flowing dress that revealed the outline of her last pregnancy. And so Mary as a little toddler could gaze up at her mother – at some point becoming aware that she was looking upon herself in the womb – and coming to know that her very existence had carried off her mother and orphaned her sister, Fanny. Of her father Mary wrote, “He adored my mother, he mourned her to the point of insanity; but his grief was silent, devouring, gloomy.”

The effect upon Mary and Fanny is reflected in a comment of Samuel Coleridge, who frequented the Godwin household. When Mary was two, he wrote of the “cadaverous silence of the children.” The haunting effects of the “cadaverous presence” of Mary Wollstonecraft reappears in certain chapters of another later novel of Mary’s, entitled “Lodore,” whose central character, a child named Ethel, becomes a transparent mask for Mary.

Ethel lives alone with her father who, “had taken refuge in the furthest wilds of an almost untenanted part of the globe. That which reconciled his lot was the growth and development of his child scarcely three years old . . . then a plaything and an object of solicitude for him – nothing more. He had not learned to discover the germ of the soul

just nascent in her infant form . . . he gazed on her with ardent and unquiet fondness; his affection for her was the passion of his soul.

“She dreaded only his disapprobation which would turn her as with a silken string and bend at once to his will. Her earliest feeling was love of her father – she grew into the image on which his eye doted, and for whose presence her heart perpetually yearned. Ethel was taught to know herself as dependent through a deficiency in her father, in whom . . . she inspired more than a father’s fondness – he lived but for her and in her.”

Ethel is fantasized up out of Mary’s experience with the grieving Godwin, whose own need-driven fault blinded him to Mary’s own inner nature. His passion reveals the surface of *Jouissance* – that French word that in its psychoanalytic dimension surpasses its usual translation as “pleasure” and extends into the nobleman’s “right of pleasure” to control, rape, abuse, reject and even murder his subject. *Jouissance* in this latter sense first finds expression in the character of Victor Frankenstein and ultimately in the monster he creates.

Mary expresses the imagined erotism of her own father through the words of Ethel’s father, who muses, “within that lovely bower of flesh no thought or feeling resided that was not akin to heaven in its purity and sweetness.... He as by infection acquired a portion of the calm enjoyment which she in her taintless youth naturally possessed.

Now, let us turn to what happens when it becomes the creature’s time to procreate. At age 16 Mary became pregnant by Percy Shelley, and in February of 1815, she gave birth to a premature infant daughter who died four days later. Grief-stricken, Mary wrote, “I would like a dormouse roll myself in cotton at the bottom of my cage and

never peep out.” She dreamed that she carried the dead infant to the hearth where the warmth of the fire revived it. She awoke in despair – and took to bed, reportedly suffering from a bout of that vague “illness” that was to emerge from time to time throughout her life.

In her dream we discern the impossible desire that fueled Victor Frankenstein’s perverse quest to conquer death. Mary dream works against her unavoidable question, “Am I destined to destroy – first my mother and then my daughter.”

Having established a series of events that inscribed themselves as an unconscious gravitas I want to turn to Mary’s choice of the word, “Frankenstein,” as the title of her “dream work.” We learn that during that summer of 1816, she visited a castle named after a certain Count Frankenstein, and this accounts for her choice.

Perhaps – but Mary was such a wordsmith that we should consider an alternative and examine how her unconscious gravitas might have determined her choice. If we divide the word into “Frank -en -stein,” let’s see what emerges. To begin with, “stein” is the German word for “stone.” Next, to frank means to stamp a letter or a document to assure its passage. And so embedded in the word “Frankenstein” are two other meanings: “to stamp into or upon a stone” and “to assure passage of the stone.” Finally, to be frank is also a trait that found its way into Mary’s character. Godwin was straightforward and honest to a fault. We recall the hue and cry over his memorial to Wollstonecraft.

Godwin often took Mary to Wollstonecraft’s grave, where he reminisced about her. We find that Mary learned the alphabet by tracing the letters inscribed in the gravestone. The stone embodies her mother if the phrase, “well crafted stone” is seen as

a transposition of Wollstonecraft. Finally Mary was literally stamped with her mother's full name – mother and daughter shared the name: Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. And so in a certain sense Mary did not have a name of her own - a name that distinguished her as unique. Tellingly, the monster of “Frankenstein” remained unnamed – and little Ethel of “Lodore” complained that her father's fault blinded him to her nascent soul. He could not identify Ethel as a unique individual but regarded her only as a compensatory object.

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was inscribed in her soul as graphically as were carved the letters of her mother's name into the gravestone. The place itself exerted a magnetic pull. There she escaped from her step-mother and there she spent hours with Percy Shelley – reading and sharing all her mother's works with him.

Let's return to the genesis of the novel, Frankenstein. Here is Mary, the future author, now 19 years old and again a mother cradling, six month old William, in her uncertain arms - her creative talents unleashed by a nightmare. It is not to be lost on us that her son bears her father, Godwin's first name, and in the novel another William, Victor's little brother, becomes the monster's first victim.

The novel begins with a series of letters written by a polar explorer named Walton to his sister in England. Walton, a lonely man who yearns for a companion, is in the midst of preparations for an ocean voyage to find the magnetic north pole. His quest for the magnetic north pole as a metaphor for the attraction of the desired object, emerges in the later novel, Lodore. “When Ethel's father was away, Ethel remained in his imagination and was the loadstone that drew him home. He believed that in possessing one ready devoted perfect friend one cannot be truly miserable.” We are not surprised to

discover that Walton will find a soul-mate in Victor Frankenstein, who, taken aboard Walton's ship half-dead, reveals the whole of his horrifying adventure to him.

Walton's quest differs from Victor's quest by remaining within the limits of possibility. Throughout Walton remains a prudent man, who will not allow his crew to perish in Victor's unwavering attempt to capture his monstrous creation. He serves to anchor the tale that we become progressively drawn into – a tale that springs from Victor's grandiose desire: “What glory would attend the discovery if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!”

Chapter 5 of the novel describes Victor Frankenstein's act of creation. It opens with these wonderful ominous lines: “It was a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.”

Victor is horrified and withdraws to bed in hope that the spark of life will extinguish itself. He abandons his creation. The nearly burnt out candle captures the effect of perverse desire that overrides the desire for human contact and even obliterates the satisfaction of basic needs. “I could not tear my thoughts from my employment, loathsome in itself, but which had taken an irresistible hold of my imagination. . . Winter, spring and summer passed away during my labours; but I did not watch the blossom or the expanding leaves . . .the leaves of that year had withered before my work drew near to

a close . . . I appeared rather as one doomed by slavery to toil in the mines – I was oppressed by a slow fever . . . and I shunned my fellow creatures as if I had been guilty of a crime. Sometimes I grew alarmed at the wreck I perceived that I had become; the energy of my purpose alone sustained me.”

The abandoned creature wanders off and gives voice to his dawning awareness, “It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being; all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt at the same time and it was, indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses.”

Mary’s description of the fragmentary nature of the creature’s experience captures the hallmark of our humanity. Born too soon, the human infant is subject to a fragmentation of sensation and a lack of physical coordination. Mary’s insight into just how dependent an infant is upon adults finds ominous expression in Lodore:

“The instructor can cultivate the sensibility and talent of the pupil and direct her affection - as she puts forth, as a parasite, tendrils by which to cling – not knowing to what – to a supporter or a destroyer. . . . “

The helpless and pliable infant is utterly dependent upon adults whose responses range from ways that exaggerate and perpetuate fragmentation to those that foster the integration of disjointed and manifold sensations into coherent patterns.

But this creature has no parents, “It was dark when I awoke; I felt cold also, and half frightened finding myself so desolate . . . I was a poor miserable wretch . . . and feeling pain invade me on all sides I sat down and wept.” But “soon a gentle light stole

over the heavens . . . no distinct idea occupied my mind . . . the only object I could detect was the bright moon and I fixed my eyes on that with pleasure”

We are interested in what experiences Mary might have had as a newborn that promoted such a lack of integration as she attributes to the creature. Mary’s initial experience with her mother was short-lived. So the image of her mother’s face – barely established – faded into oblivion.

Godwin had befriended a widow named Mrs. Reveley, and it was she who took in the newborn immediately after Wollstonecraft died. Mary remained with her for eight days and upon her return to the Godwin household was so consumed by fever that there was great apprehension that Mary would soon follow her mother into the grave.

So Mrs. Reveley, her name synonymous with the military trumpeter’s “reveille” that awakens the troops, provided a fiery wake up call to the infant in her charge. On the other hand, Frankenstein’s creature wakes from a sea of chaotic sensations to the pleasure of moonlight. There is a human propensity to project the foundational image of the human face on anything that bears resemblance to it. And the phrase “the man in the moon,” suggests that the rugged terrain of the moon provides a pattern that captures and fixes the human face. To project the image of a face upon a heavenly body parallels the infant’s early search for a face where he can locate his mother’s responses to his own spontaneous gestures. Mary gives us this very experience in *Lodore*: Describing Ethel she writes, “There was something in her face that at this early age gave token of truth and affection,” Mary continues on for a page-long paragraph that closely details each feature of Ethel’s face. The reader readily composes the image of Ethel’s face pieced together from Mary’s text.

Returning to Mary's infantile experience, to everyone's relief and joy she quickly rallied after her return to the Godwin household. Godwin had formed a circle of attendants so that Mary was provided with three several surrogate mothers. Miss Julia Jones was the central figure. She was assisted by Marguerite Fournee, a French woman Wollstonecraft had employed to care for Fanny two years previously. Godwin's autocratic behavior shows itself again in a terse notation, "Wet nurse let go at eight months." Thus the function of nursing was carried on by yet a third unnamed woman.

That such of Godwin's actions served to tear apart the mothering circle was compounded when Miss Jones stay was interrupted when Mary was eighteen months old. That Miss Jones herself had designs on Godwin is attested by her successfully re-entering the household and remaining there for another year before being dismissed for good

Thus Mary's first perception of a face – her mothers – faded quickly, to be replaced by a second associated with a condition of near lethal fever, then to be succeeded by a trio of faces that came and went. And so for Mary the single face that would ideally serve as a constant responsive mirror to promote integration was instead a manifold composition of faces – each of time-limited duration.

To return to the thread of the novel's narrative – the creature, determined to satisfy his needs, comes into contact with humans. He happens upon a cluster of small huts, and when he is discovered: "The whole village was roused; some fled, some attacked me until, grievously bruised . . . I escaped to the open country and fearfully took refuge in a low hovel. Here then, I retreated and lay down happy to have found a shelter, however miserable from the inclemency of the season, and still more from the barbarity of man."

The hovel is attached to a hut into which he can peer and observe the inhabitants of the cottage – an aged blind father, and his adult son and daughter. What he sees imbues him with human emotion. “The silver hair and benevolent countenance of the aged cottager won my reverence, while the gentle manners of the girl enticed my love.” There follows a long description of how he learns to speak and to read. It is as if Mary is giving an account of her own experience in the Godwin household, which was frequented by many budding and established writers.

The creature, having in mind the perfect form of the cottagers, by chance glanced into a pool. “[I could not believe] that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensation of despondence and mortification.”

Still, he remains undaunted. “I presented in my imagination a thousand pictures of presenting myself to the cottagers, and their reception of me. . . . and what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant, but I know that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was besides embued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome . . . I cannot describe to you the agony these reflections inflicted upon me.”

At last he decides to take the risk and knocks at the door. The old man admits him. They converse a bit and at last the old man says, “I am blind and cannot judge from your countenance but there is something in your words which persuades me you are sincere.”

Mary presents us with a hopeful and ironic reversal. The blind man’s statement contrasts sharply with Ethel’s lament in *Lodore*. Ethel knows that her father’s deficiency rendered him blind to her nascent soul, and desirous of her body. Whereas the old man is

blind to the physical deformity of the creature, but discerns through his speech the nascent soul the creature has struggled to develop.

But no sooner had the old man uttered this than they hear the approaching footsteps of the old man's children. They enter and see the creature kneeling before him, grasping his knees, imploring him to help. His daughter shrieks and faints, and his son falls upon the creature thinking him to be attacking his father. The creature checks an impulse to kill the young man, and instead flees retaining a shred of hope that he might still engage with humans. But this remnant falls away as he again finds himself a lonely wanderer.

"Cursed, cursed creator," he shrieks, "Why did I live? Why in that instant did I not extinguish the spark of existence you had so wantonly bestowed? Among the myriads of men that existed, there was none who would pity or assist me; and I should feel kindness toward my enemies. No; from this moment I declare everlasting war against the species, and more than that, against him who had formed me and sent me forth to this unsupportable misery." Unfeeling heartless creator! You had endowed me with perceptions and passions and then cast me abroad an object for the scorn and horror of mankind".

The die is cast; he wants from that moment on only to revenge himself upon Victor. He sets to stalk him but on the way happens upon a little girl who has fallen into a river. His vengeful urge is interrupted by a shred of human feeling; he plunges into the river and rescues her from drowning. Her father, however, thinking him to be a kidnapper shoots him, "The ball entered my shoulder and I do not know whether it remained there or passed through . . my sufferings were augmented by the oppressive

sense of injustice and ingratitude of their infliction. My daily vows rose for revenge – a deep and deadly revenge.

Continuing his search for Victor he encounters Victor's much younger brother, William. The creature seizes the child thinking to possess him as the companion he longs for. William screams out, "I will call my big brother, Victor Frankenstein."

"Frankenstein," the creature retorts, "You belong then to my enemy – to whom I have sworn eternal revenge – you shall be my first victim. The child continued to struggle and loaded me with epithets which carried despair to my heart; I grasped his throat to silence him and in a moment he lay dead at my feet."

At last Victor and the monster meet. The fiend demands of Victor that he create a companion to relieve his loneliness. Victor refuses and the fiend rages, "I will revenge my injuries, if I cannot inspire love I will cause fear, and chiefly towards you my arch-enemy – I swear inextinguishable hatred - - I will work for your destruction, nor finish until I desolate your heart, so that you shall curse the hour of your birth."

Faced with this oath, Victor cowers – has a change of heart – and agrees to once again dedicate himself to his "unhallowed art" - and create the female companion to relieve the misery of his abandoned creature. But abhorred at the prospect of propagating a new murderous race of fiends, Victor tears apart the half completed work of his second project

In what way might the tearing apart of a future bride figure in Mary's life? When Mary was 4, Godwin met a widow named Mrs. Clairmont who admired him greatly. She slyly succeeded in becoming his new wife. When she and her three children entered the Godwin household Mary's exclusive bond with her father was abruptly

sundered.. Mary came to regard her as her “wicked stepmother,” while her new-step sister, Claire became her constant companion.

As we have seen, Mary sustained a fantasy of Oedipal victory in the later novel, *Lodore*. This not only glosses over her humiliating Oedipal loss but also covers over Mary’s distressing adolescence. Let’s compare the fantasy with reality.

In *Lodore* Mary tells how (quote), “The passage of time led Ethel from infancy to childhood and brought her father from the prime of life to decline. The loss of a wife then becomes more deplorable, as being impossible to repair; for no fresh connection can give us back the companion of our earlier years nor a ‘new sprung race’ compensate for that loss.”

Ethel’s father had sunk into inactivity. But determined to break out of his inaction, he decided to accompany a surveying party leaving the now 15 year old Ethel behind to pursue her artistic activities. She shares her affinity to landscape painting with a young man who soon becomes infatuated with her.

“Ethel listened to his complaints of wretchedness. Eve listened to the serpent and ever since her daughters have been accused of giving ear to forbidden discourse. [And so she became] as a magician holding for the first time a fairy wand – Ethel had read of the power of love but doubted how far she should exercise its influence. He on the other hand impressed on her mind the idea that he lived or died through her fiat.

Her triumphant exercise of the “magic wand” is suddenly intruded upon by “the dark expressive eyes of her father, censuring her lowly vanity – she felt degraded and humiliated – remorse sprung from her gentle heart. She pulls away from the boy and when her father returns, she confesses all. Her father confronted with this sign of Ethel’s

budding sexuality, resolves that the two will quit their isolated existence and return to England.

As Ethel held a “magic wand,” so did Mary - but in a much different way. Six months after Mary’s menstrual period began, her hand became the site of a weeping eczema – and her whole arm became paralyzed. Her useless arm and blistered hand became as dead body parts. This hysterical symptom identifies her with her mother through the act of writing. . As evidence, we find this notation from Mary’s diary: “Even the contemplation of writing would lift my spirits.” In her writing Mary was one with her living mother, and in her useless arm one with her dead mother.

Mary’s menarche became a stigma of her entrance into womanhood and the possibility of childbearing – to which the letters of her body write their response. The paralyzed arm makes writing impossible thus breaking her symbolic tie to mother – her unwept tears filling the weeping blisters of her hand.

Godwin sought care for Mary. The doctors lanced the blisters and put Mary’s arm in a sling – which had absolutely no curative effect. So Godwin, in league with his wife, decided upon a “rest cure.” They send Mary off to a dismal boarding school. She returns six months later, no better.

The answer to why Godwin might want Mary out of sight might be found in the details of Mary’s birth.. Her delivery was not problematic, but the placenta was not expelled. The doctor attempted to extract it manually, quite a bloody undertaking and one that introduced the infection that carried Wollstonecraft off ten days later.

Godwin still had his problem: here was Mary returned to him –no better. But fortunately another admirer of Godwin – a man named Baxter, hearing of Mary’s plight

offered to take her into his home on the Scottish coast. Parenthetically it is to Scotland that Victor Frankenstein had traveled to set to work upon the monster's bride.

Baxter was a gentle, relaxed and indulgent man. Mary and his eldest daughter a few years her senior quickly became fast friends. After several months in this welcoming climate her symptoms melted and, now aged 16, she returned home cured – and soon encountered Percy Shelley, who like many other aspiring writers – sought entrance to the Godwin literary circle.

Their complex romance is reduced to a simple flirtation in Lodore. Shelley was immediately attracted by Mary's beauty and vivacity. The two shared a love of literature – as did Ethel and her admirer share a love of painting. Mary's talent for writing made of her pen a "magic wand," that cast its spell over Percy.

At last at age 17, Mary declared her sentiments to Percy and uttered poignantly and hopefully, "Our love will enable us to endure anything." All this went on in the face of the fact that Percy was already married. Of Harriet – from whom he had separated – he said, "I felt as if a dead and a living body had been bonded together in loathsome and horrible communion," a statement that could well have found its way into Frankenstein and referred to Mary experience with her paralyzed arm.

Their subsequent elopement did nothing to endear Percy to Godwin. We find this echoed in Lodore when Ethel's father, confronted with Ethel's budding sexuality, resolves that the two will quit their isolated existence and return to England.

Now with this in mind, let us return to Frankenstein, where Victor has just sealed his fate by having torn apart the monster's prospective bride. The fiend's "footsteps

sound along the passage; the door opened, and the wretch whom I dreaded appeared.

‘You have destroyed the work which you began . . . do you dare to break your promise?’”

“‘Begone!’”, Victor retorts, “I do break my promise; never will I create another like yourself, equal in deformity and wickedness.”

“‘Slave,’ The creature vows, ‘before, I reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you.’” . . . Victor continues, “My dreams presented a thousand objects that scared me. Towards morning I was possessed by a kind of nightmare; I felt the fiend’s grasp in my neck and could not free myself from it; groans and cries rang in my ears.”

Victor at last confesses to his father, “Alas – how little do you know me. Here is another version of the blind father – unable to see through his own wishful projections upon his son. He cannot see what Victor reports to him, “Human beings, their feelings and passions, would indeed be degraded if such a wretch as I felt pride. . . . I am the cause of this – I murdered them all . . . they all died in my hands.”

The creator and his creation become confused, the monster having become an extension of Victor’s impossible *jouissance* – his perverse desire to create dissolves into a perverse desire to kill. The creature – now become a monstrous fiend – visits upon Victor the agony that Victor has brought him, and he strangles Victor’s bride on their wedding night.

The die is cast as Victor, as if infected by the monster, exclaims, “My revenge . . . is the devouring and only passion of my soul. My rage is unspeakable when I reflect that

the murderer, whom I have turned loose upon society, still exists. . . I have but one resource, and I devote myself, either in my life or death, to his destruction.”

And so Victor pursues the monster, who staying just out of reach, leads him northward into the frozen wastes. Victor is almost at the point of death when Walton rescues him from an ice floe. Each is in search of the object of his desire in this frozen wasteland. The difference between the two men becomes evident when Walton, responding the entreaties of his crew that they must turn back or perish, determines to give up his quest.

But Victor – whose perverse desire is limitless, and heedless of consequence – addresses the crew, “What do you mean? What do you demand of your captain? Are you, then, so easily turned from your design? Did you not call this a glorious expedition? . . . And now, behold, with the first imagination of danger or the first mighty and terrific trial of your courage, you shrink away . . . Do not return to your families with the stigma of disgrace marked on your brows. Return as heroes who have fought and conquered and who know not what it is to turn their backs on the foe.”

Victor is speaking into a mirror – which reflects back to him in the forms of the crew – his own urgings. He continues, “You may give up your purpose, but mine is assigned to me by heaven, and I dare not. I am weak, but surely the spirits who assist my vengeance will endow me with sufficient strength.’ Saying this he endeavored to spring from the bed, but the exertion was too great for him; he fell back and fainted.”

His vengeful and perverse desire has detached itself from any worldly satisfaction and is exclusively dedicated to destruction. Mary grasps the overwhelming power of

lethal jouissance. More than a century later Freud formulated this as the death drive in his article: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Victor soon dies and Walton “enters the cabin where lay the remains of my ill-fated and admirable friend. Over him hung a form which I cannot find words to describe – gigantic in stature, yet uncouth and distorted in its proportions . . . one vast hand was extended, in color and apparent texture like that of a mummy. Never did I behold a vision so horrible as his face, of such loathsome yet appalling hideousness.”

The monster points to Victor’s corpse and exclaims to Walton, “He suffered not the ten-thousandth portion of the anguish that was mine . . . my heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy, and when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred, it did not endure the violence of the change without torture such as you cannot even imagine. When I discovered that he sought his own enjoyment in feelings and passions from the indulgence of which I was forever barred, then impotent envy and bitter indignation filled me with an insatiable thirst for vengeance . . . and I became the slave, not the master, of an impulse I detested yet could not disobey.”

“But soon I shall die – I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace, or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus. Farewell.”

The monster is slave to the death drive. So the tale ends with the notion of a transcendental subject that keeps on thinking. Mary recognizes the difficulty of locating the unconscious subject of language. As subjects, impacted by the death drive, we are

more thought up from some place and by some thing outside our awareness, than are we thoughtful agents in command of our destinies.

Postscript

Today a wealth of material affords us a range of perspectives on Mary Shelley – including her own diaries and those of her contemporaries and the many current biographies of her and of the Godwin circle. Opinions about her vary: some have denigrated her character while others offer praise.

With this in mind I would like to close by tracing out one thread that coursed through her very difficult life – her relation to death. As beneficiaries of modern medicine, it is difficult for us today to appreciate the appalling level of infant and maternal mortality that occurred in the early eighteenth century.

But for Mary there was more tragedy. In 1816 while working on *Frankenstein* she received word that her half-sister, Fanny died of an overdose, and three months later, that Percy's estranged wife, Harriet had thrown herself into a river and drowned.

Then in 1819 three year old William became ill and died as did another daughter, one year old Clara the following year. In 1822 three months after Mary miscarried yet another pregnancy, Percy drowned in a boating accident. She sought to sustain herself once again through her writing, and she began a new diary. Mary called it "Journal of Sorrows – if it were not for my child I would make it brief."

And so like the minor character, Walton of "Frankenstein," it was her link to humanity that sustained her. She nurtured her son Percy Florence who grew to manhood and lived a full life. She was dedicated to the memory and the literary legacy of her

husband, and it may well be that if it were not for her successful efforts to posthumously publish many of his works we might not know Percy Shelley as fully as we do today.

She sustained herself through her writing and by means of a small stipend from Percy's father, and died at the age of 54 of a brain tumor. She had turned down several marriage proposals, stating, "I want to be Mary Shelley on my tombstone."

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