



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Lake Methodism

Jasper Cragwall

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Cragwall, Jasper.

Lake Methodism: Polite Literature and Popular Religion in England, 1780–1830.

The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/27533](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27533).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27533>



## Chapter 6

# Resurrection, the New Birth, and Vital Christianity

## The Methodism to Frankenstein's Madness

Joanna Southcott brings us close to Victor Frankenstein, while seeming to take us very far afield. Intimacy appears in inversion, as Romanticism's most famous pregnancy without a birth, and birth without a pregnancy, each feature their own hysteric bodies, putrescent corpses, and reanimations performed not at all, or only too well: both hideous progeny of what Ellen Moers identified as the "Female Gothic," that discourse of physiological terror at the terror of physiology, rooted in the "glands, muscles, epidermis, and circulatory system" of feminine objects and subjects.<sup>1</sup> Some thirty years ago, *Frankenstein* began to benefit from a critical revolution so entirely persuasive as to become a benevolently *ancien régime*, and it's now difficult (if not fruitless) to attend to the novel without Anne Mellor's invitation to read it as "a book about what happens when a man tries to have a baby without a woman," concerned "with natural as opposed to unnatural modes of production and reproduction."<sup>2</sup>

1. Ellen Moers, "Female Gothic," in *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepfelmacher (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1982 [1979]), 77–87 (77–78).

2. Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York:

With only a few deforming transformations, this might be Southcott's story as much as Shelley's. Creation, procreation, and the disappointments of both, a story at once deeply personal and utterly alienated from the woman who authored it: if Southcott's "Shiloh" mirrored the nation rather than its mother, there was never a time, except perhaps in the seminar room, when Shelley's novel was better known than its adaptations.<sup>3</sup>

Yet if one critical tradition might suggest the community between prophetess and prophet's wife, a second, almost as established and compelling, ought to keep them apart. Southcott's eccentric, profound, and profoundly literal religiosity would seem to find scant purchase on Shelley's atheistic materialism, or on the novel which emanates from it. *Frankenstein's* is, after all, a modern sort of Prometheism. If there's a mythological registry here, it's decidedly classical and skeptical. The novel's title page banishes Christian dogma into the poem that Percy Shelley thought its fullest indictment, partially voicing Adam's rebellious adolescence, without his subsequent awareness that he is patriarch as well as son, a master by the same logic which subordinates him.<sup>4</sup> The story following this allusive abjuration is "starkly secular," according to Chris Baldick, as it "explores the godless world of specifically modern freedoms and responsibilities."<sup>5</sup> Judith Wilt argues that the only religion left by "Mary Shelley's atheistic trinity" is a theologically savvy parody of a medieval mystery play, in which the "absence of God is celebrated in the presence of metaphor,"<sup>6</sup> what Paul Cantor calls Shelley's "gnostic twist to her creation myth."<sup>7</sup>

---

Methuen, 1988), 40.

3. See especially St. Clair, *Reading Nation*, 357–73, for the different social lives of *Frankenstein* as book and "Frankenstein" as cultural phenomenon in the nineteenth century. The success of the 1818 novel was modest, and though resurrected in 1831, it again went out of print in a few decades, reappearing only toward the end of the century—all while various dramatic adaptations flourished. Susan Wolfson provides a valuable survey of more modern "Frankentalk," as well as a wittily annotated compendium of film and TV versions, in her edition of *Frankenstein* (Longman, 2007 [2nd ed.]), 402–24; 429–31.

4. As Adam reasons within twenty lines of claiming he never asked to be born:

and though God  
Made thee without thy leave, what if thy Son  
Prove disobedient, and reprov'd, retort,  
Wherefore didst thou beget me? I sought it not:  
Wouldst thou admit for his contempt of thee  
That proud excuse? (*Paradise Lost* 10:759–64)

5. Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 42; 5.

6. Wilt, "Frankenstein as Mystery Play," in Levine and Knoepfelmacher, *Endurance of Frankenstein*, 31–48 (40; 32).

7. Paul Cantor, *Creature and Creator: Myth-Making and English Romanticism* (Cam-

So the familiar story goes: in the midst of all the uncanny horrors of the novel, the antithesis between Faith and Reason can still be found at its most comfortably extreme. Frankenstein may be mad, but there's a specifically scientific method to his madness: "I paused, examining and analyzing all the minutiae of causation."<sup>8</sup> His Creature, while perhaps woefully anti-natural, has its supernaturalism thoroughly naturalized. Its construction, as Frankenstein makes sure to note, proceeds from a logical series of "discoveries in the improvement of some chemical instruments, which procured me great esteem and admiration at the university" (31–32). "The stages of the discovery were distinct and probable," and there's not a whiff of the mystical: the whole event is explicitly "not . . . like a magic scene" (33). Steven Jones rightly cautions against projecting our contemporary "science" and its discontents onto Victor, who is more alchemist than chemist and "still a long way from the modern technologist,"<sup>9</sup> but Victor's obsessive scholarship, distinct from its quality, situates him socially as well as intellectually. The resurrection that follows seems worlds removed from the miserable absurdities of the Southcottians: Frankenstein's errors are those of a man too well educated, so supremely privileged that his very monsters are the deformities of his class advantages. The Creature, in a perverse way, is the shambling reminder of (but not only of) his creator's dignity, which the very first words of his narrative trumpet: "my family is one of the most distinguished" of Geneva (17).

But Victor's cover of rationalist distinction is thin. If his "workshop of filthy creation" presents an inevitably iconic laboratory of sparking instruments and foaming beakers, this is a readerly intuition determined by centuries of dramatic and cinematic revision. Shelley herself describes his lair in only the vaguest terms, "a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house," while leaving the actual mechanics of reanimation entirely undefined (35). The narcissistic entitlement of Frankenstein's self-heroizing is sometimes ludicrous, and often certifiable, as he makes each of the novel's fatally suffering subjectivities "but a type of me" (204). Yet despite his self-absorption, Victor relays a narrative deeply problematic for a member of a ruling elite. Whatever else he is, Frankenstein is an "enthusiast," and not an enthusiast of the better sort. The word is positively endemic in his story, sometimes occurring many times in a single page: it was an "enthusiastic frenzy that blinded me to the horror of my employment," a "mad

---

bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 105.

8. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2007), 32. Further citations appear in parentheses.

9. Steven E. Jones, *Against Technology*, 115.

enthusiasm” that spawns his “enemy,” though at times this “enthusiasm was checked by my anxiety” (128, 144, 36). Endemic, and infectious. Frankenstein’s disciple Robert Walton breathes the same heady air, feeling his “heart glow with an enthusiasm which elevates me to heaven,” where he might hold final communion with Victor; in a fit of “enthusiasm” Walton describes him as “this divine wanderer . . . a celestial spirit, that has a halo around him” (6, 16).

The story of *Lake Methodism* concludes with this “enthusiasm” that bonds these would-be titans of masculine self-aggrandizement. Frankenstein’s “enthusiasm,” so often received as adventurous hubris, is more deeply and pervasively connected to the besotted lunacies of Southcott and other traditions of religious enthusiasm. Victor—like Southcott, lay preachers, Wordsworth, and Coleridge—declares “I prophesied truly” (52). To take him seriously is also to take him out of the politely deranged laboratory and into the disreputable chapel, from which he emerges with a cultural prehistory more Wesleyan than Newtonian. Scholars who have discovered only the dessicated husk of secularized religion in *Frankenstein* may have been looking for the wrong thing, in the wrong place. While there’s very little spiritual orthodoxy (or any other orthodoxy, for that matter) in the novel, it overflows with the most urgently popular—and the most socially problematic—religious forms of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Gospel as much as Galvanism drives Victor’s quest to make the dead live again—though, as we’ll see, these weren’t contradictory formations—and the account which follows his “new birth,” filled as it is with self-appointed martyrs, prophets, and devils engaged in cosmic struggle, reads like a pitch-perfect rendition of spiritual warfare. Frankenstein has boldly gone where most enthusiasts tried, and failed, to go. As the American *Eclectic Magazine* recounted in 1851, Southcott herself, before attempting to give birth to God, had been disappointed in giving life to the dead:

On another occasion, to confirm her disciples, a miracle was announced to be performed on a certain day; and this was to raise a corpse to life. The Devil, however, in the shape of Wortley, an officer of the Union Hall Office, interposed and spoiled the effect, by proposing that the dead man should first be stabbed with a dagger. The corpse not liking such a process got up and ran away, to the great astonishment of the congregation.<sup>10</sup>

---

10. “The Curiosities of Eccentric Biography,” *Eclectic Magazine* 23.3 (New York, March 1851): 401–9 (408).

But what had safely devolved into farce by the middle of the century was quite serious several decades earlier, when the rhetorics, and, not uncommonly, the practices of spiritual and physical resurrection, still possessed an electric charge.

Methodism, Southey reminded the nation two years after the first edition of *Frankenstein*, was “Vital Christianity,” which “hoped to give a new impulse to the Church of England, to awaken its dormant zeal, infuse life into a body where nothing but life was wanting.”<sup>11</sup> These enthusiastic Vitalities were personal as well as national, animating sinners along with churches in what James Lackington, whose firm would publish *Frankenstein* three years after his death, called (along with every other Methodist) “pass[ing] through the *New Birth*,” as vile bodies were changed for glorious bodies, “and (to the great grief of his parents)” one might “become a *new creature*.”<sup>12</sup> If Lackington’s Oedipal hint suggests a publishing house uniquely primed to grasp the appeal of new creatures warring with old parents, other Methodist converts described their transformations in language even more strikingly prefigurative of Frankenstein’s experiment: “I felt as if Lightning, or a slower ethereal Flame, had been penetrating and rolling through every Atom of my Body.”<sup>13</sup> In its atomic power, this “new birth” warns against too easily conflating materialism with atheism in the early nineteenth century; molecular detail could be just one more field for the activation of Providential energy. The sort of narrative which Victor propounds conforms to Methodist as well as scientific conventions. Southey’s horrified rehearsal in 1810 of the typifying insanities of Wesleyan autobiography doubles as a remarkably accurate plot summary for Shelley’s novel: “They tell us of devils hovering about the death-bed of an unbeliever, and record the ravings of delirium as actual and terrific truths . . . and in one instance, not indeed in direct terms, but in expressions that unambiguously are intended to be so understood, they lay claim to the miracle of having raised the dead!”<sup>14</sup>

These enthusiastic formations—new births and new creatures, death and life-in-death, resurrection and reanimation, and the battle between the elect and the Devil—seem to me essential for understanding some of the peculiar (and peculiarly ironic) force of *Frankenstein*, and later sections of this chapter will explore each in more detail. None of this is to say that the novel is “religious” in any metaphysical sense. Shelley offers

11. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 1:264.

12. Lackington, *Memoirs*, 42.

13. Quoted in Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 134.

14. Southey, “On the Evangelical Sects,” 508.

critique, not confession, one typically oriented around social rather than spiritual effects, the personal and interpersonal disfigurements consequent upon enthusiastic discourse. Yet perhaps even this limited reading of *Frankenstein*'s "religion" seems to miss the mark, frustrated, if not by Shelley's text itself, then by the para-text in Percy Shelley's hand. While Mary's 1831 "Introduction" paints its "pale student of unhallowed arts" (190) as a warlock rather than professor, whose "unhallowed" transgressions are explicitly blasphemous, rather than simply in defiance of the protocols of peer-review, Percy's 1818 "Preface" frames the novel with a doubled skepticism: if the "event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as of not impossible occurrence," nevertheless "I shall not be supposed as according the remotest degree of serious faith to such an imagination" (3).

These Darwinian and continental attestations build a handbook, not for the science of life and irregular creation, but for the empirical doubt upon which such science might be based, in which experimental "supposition" tracks only to its own falsification ("I shall not be supposed"), prefacing the novelist, if not the novel, as the proponent of a rationalist epistemology which rejects "the remotest degree of serious faith." Yet the uncontrolled pun on "the remotest degree" also suggests that this "Preface" isn't entirely in control of the novel it introduces, a novel that willfully begins in a contrarian embrace of the remotest degrees of frozen temperatures and forbidden latitudes. This gap between Percy Shelley and *Frankenstein* is as much my subject as "enthusiasm," though ultimately they amount to the same thing, as the novel's sociospiritual critique figures the enthusiasms of the poet's own discourse as its object. Percy worked over the original draft meticulously, and somewhat cluelessly: his assertion that the novel's "chief concern" was "the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection" (4) is either a piece of very sharp wit, or very dull criticism. But if he had any difficulty reading *Frankenstein*, it reads him, and the cultural privileges invested in him, with sublime irony.<sup>15</sup>

## The Shelleys' Enthusiasms

Like Victor Frankenstein, Percy Shelley was an enthusiast, and like Victor, not always one of the better sort. He was, as Stephen Behrendt remarks

---

15. Anne Mellor has painstakingly recreated Percy's editorial attentions and inattentions to *Frankenstein*, in *Mary Shelley*, 58–69 and 219–24.

near the beginning of *Shelley and His Audiences*, “always enthusiastic,” an observation which amplifies the poet’s insecurities.<sup>16</sup> “Enthusiasm” maps Percy’s intersection with what I’ve tried to identify as “Lake Methodism,” the double-crossing of poetical prestige and popular religion, in which even one of the Romantic period’s most outspoken skeptics might find himself snared. Not that this Shelley always registered the pressure: in his optimistically unproblematic moods, he figured “enthusiasm” as a blessed relaxation of the social, brought on by tensing imaginative nerves. As he wrote in a letter of 1812 on *Queen Mab*: “You will perceive that I have not attempted to temper my constitutional enthusiasm in that Poem. Indeed a Poem is safe, the iron-souled Attorney general would scarcely dare to attack ‘genus irritabile vatum.’”<sup>17</sup>

This “enthusiasm” mediates the poetic and the political: it affiliates Shelley with the vatic tradition (as well as the cultural capital of the classically educated) by force of the Hellenic sense of “a prophetic or poetical rage or fury, which transports the mind.”<sup>18</sup> Shelley canonizes himself and his “Poem” within this tradition, as if to work a transport so supremely aestheticized as to be beyond political action, or at least criminal responsibility. In its punning “constitutionality,” Shelley’s enthusiasm appeals to a metaphorical and metaphysical code conveniently beyond the material chains of the Attorney general’s “iron-souled” absolutism.

Even in this bare outline, Percy Shelley’s thinking on enthusiasm—as a nexus of rhetorical and class privilege that resolves the historically problematic by virtue of aesthetic transcendence—sketches the unmistakable form of the Romantic Ideology. If, as Bryan Shelley argues, Percy continually twists “biblically informed language against the biblical worldview,”<sup>19</sup> the poet still finds some eremitical attraction in turning inherited spiritualisms against the world with the vigor of a man of faith. Whether secular or sacred, Shelley’s enthusiasm cuts against the grain of History. The *Defence* that he worked on just a few years after *Frankenstein* offers an angelology rather than psychology of inspiration, “evanescent visitations of thought and feeling . . . the interpenetration of a diviner nature

16. Stephen Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), ix.

17. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), 1:324.

18. “Enthusiasm,” in Nathan Bailey, *Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, rev. Joseph Nicol Scott (London: T. Osborne and J. Shipton, 1755), pages unnumbered.

19. Bryan Shelley, *Shelley and Scripture: The Interpreting Angel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), vii.

through our own.”<sup>20</sup> Such divine visitors invariably crowd out more human contacts, and Shelley’s famous trumpet of prophecy can be a muted thing indeed, “unheard” in *Queen Mab* “by all but gifted ear.”<sup>21</sup> “Poetry is indeed something divine,” and the poet is its prophet—but his auditors, at best, overhear him as “a nightingale, who sits in darkness to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds” (*Defence* 282).

As we’ve seen several times already, however, enthusiasm could betray Romantic privilege as well as establish it. The metaphors which Shelley manufactures as vehicles of spiritual insulation and social isolation were easily driven by the vulgarizing forces they were meant to escape. When Shelley “cast himself both privately and publicly in the role of prophet and liberator,”<sup>22</sup> this act was less a daring political vision of the poet than a belated turn at a role in which Southcott was already starring, as poet-prophetess and self-styled “Woman to Deliver Her People.” If the overlap was unwelcome, it was hardly limited in scope, and many of Shelley’s most refined figures of imaginative potency can seem to have been spawned in the intellectual gutter. Percy’s figure of the “poet”—“an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven like the alterations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre”—plays on one of the most reliable Romantic tropes (*Defence* 277). But even as this embodied harp resonates with a sublime Eternity, it could strike more discordant tones. John Langhorne remarked some years earlier that such spiritual mechanics were the most hackneyed conceits of zealous hypocrites, as well: it was impossible to find “an enthusiast that did not declaim against reason—all was to be referred to internal impulses; and man was to become a mere machine, acted upon and impelled by powers not his own.”<sup>23</sup> In the grip of either enthusiasm, identity is destabilized and potentially extinguished by the influx of alterior power,<sup>24</sup> and if for Shelley this symptomatized the unsustainably exhilarating communication between “the wise, and great, and good” and that universal force which “dwells

---

20. *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Shelley’s Prose*, 275–97 (294). Subsequent references to this edition appear parenthetically.

21. *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem with Notes*, I:113, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Neville Rogers, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 1:229–337.

22. Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences*, 1.

23. John Langhorne, *Letters on Religious Retirement, Melancholy, and Enthusiasm* (London: H. Payne and W. Cropley, 1762), 11.

24. For an exploration of the rhetorical, personal, and political dangers and opportunities of this sort of enthusiastic extinction in the seventeenth century, see Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed*.

apart in its tranquility / Remote, serene, and inaccessible” (*Mont Blanc* 82; 96–97), Lord Shaftesbury had less charitably advertised the event as “a Puppet-Shew at *Bart’lemy-Fair*,” with “the Bodys of the Prophets, in their state of Prophecy, being not in their own power, but (as they say themselves) mere passive Organs, actuated by an exterior Force.”<sup>25</sup>

The spectacle of the prophet as Punch, performing to excite the gaping masses, reverses Percy Shelley’s poetical project, and its projected reception. *Queen Mab*, refashioned into political importance and popular success only once it was pirated out of Shelley’s control, opens with “the wondrous strain” that only “the enthusiast hears at evening” (I:46, 49). As if conscious of the potential pathology of this “strain,” Shelley attempted to keep the poem away from the wrong variety of enthusiast: “Let only 250 copies be printed. A small neat Quarto, on fine paper and so as to catch the aristocrats.”<sup>26</sup> This is an enthusiasm reconfigured for an audience that would mask the lineage of the discourse. While the Bishop of Exeter had fretted about enthusiasm’s tendency to “captivate the Vulgar,”<sup>27</sup> Shelley tries to snare only their landlords, writing, as he remarked about *The Refutation of Deism*, “with a view of excluding the multitude.”<sup>28</sup> Even so, Shelley’s enthusiasm can’t quite shake its Southcottian affinities, and the most forceful assertions in the *Defence* wither into a worried dance of declaration and recantation:

Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called in earlier epochs of the world legislators or prophets; a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. . . . Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events: such is the pretence of superstition. (279)

Poets are prophets, but not *that* kind of prophet: Shelley’s argument trips over “the gross sense” and the vulgar “pretence” of the prophecies of Southcott and Brothers. This sort of determined, if not entirely persuasive, qualification extended well into the reconstructions of his later rescuers, who were always haunted by the sense of distinctions that never amounted to differences.

25. [Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury], *A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm*, (London: J. Morphew, 1708), 43.

26. *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1:361.

27. Lavington, *Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compar’d*, 3.

28. *The Refutation of Deism*, in *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols. (London: Ernest Benn, 1926–28), 6:25.

In 1839, G. H. Lewes would carry the torch while dutifully attempting to douse its flame, finding in Shelley “the obduracy and strength of a martyr, an angel-martyr, however, not a fanatic.”<sup>29</sup> The abstractions contained within Shelley’s writings were not always handled so tenderly, but in each case the diagnosis was the same. In 1821, Gold’s *London Magazine* found his poetry “the outpourings of a spirit ‘steeped to the very full’ in humanity and religious enthusiasm,” while the *Monthly Chronicle* noted acidly that Shelley’s aesthetic was disfigured by its egregious affiliation with “error, enthusiasm, [and] the fanaticism of elevated sentiment.”<sup>30</sup> Shelley’s cousin, Thomas Medwin, presented the familiar argument of Shelley and the Shelleyans: “Even if Shelley had not set himself up as a reformer, his poetry was never calculated to be popular. His creations were of another world . . . clothed in too mystical a language.”<sup>31</sup>

Medwin was looking to rehabilitate Shelley for posthumous reception by softening the poet’s idiosyncrasies, but this emphasis on otherworldly mysticism conjures its opposite. It’s precisely in Shelley’s flights of greatest abstraction, his involvement with rapture, vision, imaginative displacement, and prophetic transfiguration that his poetic could be, perversely, at its most popular, as it recycles the language of enthusiasm. If Shelley and his disciples would craft, in Susan Wolfson’s phrase, a “poetics of exclusion,”<sup>32</sup> it was in large part a defense against the disreputable sociability that inhered in his thought.

It’s on this instability that Mary Shelley would press, producing a critique of Percy’s romanticism that drives to the heart of its clouded negotiation with class resonances and popularity. To be sure, as caretaker of the body of Percy’s work, Mary could toe the party line as well as Medwin or Lewes. Her meditations in her 1839 edition of Percy’s work, as Susan Wolfson observes, focus on “discriminating two audiences” for her husband, “popular and elite,” and “‘two classes’” of poetry to accommodate them: one, “‘curious and metaphysical poems,’” characterized by their “‘huntings after the obscure’” and their “‘mystic subtlety,’” and a “‘second class’” (in several senses), identified by its representations of “‘emotions

29. “Percy Bysshe Shelley,” *Westminster Review* 35 (1841): 303–44 (307).

30. Gold’s *London Magazine* (1821), “On the Philosophy and Poetry of Shelley,” in Theodore Redpath, *The Young Romantics and Critical Opinion, 1807–1824* (London: Harrap, 1973), 361. “Shelley’s Poems,” *Monthly Chronicle* 3 (April 1839): 340.

31. Thomas Medwin, *Medwin’s “Conversations of Lord Byron”* [1824], ed. Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 250.

32. Susan J. Wolfson, “Editorial Privilege: Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley’s Audiences,” in Fisch, Mellor, and Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley*, 39–72 (43).

common to us all.”<sup>33</sup> Yet as Wolfson goes on to argue, Mary found this bifurcation in Percy problematic: “Commenting that he shrugged off her entreaties ‘to write . . . in a style that commanded popular favour,’ the editor regrets that ‘the bent of his mind went the other way,’ drawn to ‘fantastic creations of his fancy.’”<sup>34</sup> Even as Mary’s editorial labor in part reified the quarantine of Percy’s enthusiasm as the lamentable symptom of his inability to descend from the sociopoetic stratosphere, she quietly needed just these inflations.

Mary Shelley’s rebranding of Percy for Victorian readers, Mary Favret suggests, was also a self-marketing at her husband’s expense, signaling that both the “poet and the poetry” were “innately unsympathetic and inaccessible,” and that editorial intervention was essential for texts so overwrought, they tended to say nothing at all: “her method successfully alienates the poet and his practice from the reading public, while it reinforces her own literary practice.”<sup>35</sup> Even Mary’s most unctuous praise for Percy’s enthusiastic genius was still subject to the frictions of gender and genre, and hagiography was itself an ironic mode. Her elaborate explanation of his failure to write a companion to *Frankenstein*—“more apt to embody ideas and sentiments in the radiance of brilliant imagery, and in the music of the most melodious verse that adorns our language, than to invent the machinery of a story,” the poet “commenced” and soon abandoned “one founded on the experiences of his early life” (188)—was also a backhanded swipe at Percy’s self-indulgent mode of creation, which James O’Rourke translates into “Sanchean phrase”: “‘He’s so smart he can’t write about anything but himself.’”<sup>36</sup>

The loyal wife was thus an oblique competitor, intimately acquainted with Percy’s authorial functions and dysfunctions. As she sighed in the 1831 “Introduction” to *Frankenstein*, “My husband, however, was, from the first, very anxious that I should prove myself worthy of my parentage. . . . He was for ever inciting me to obtain a literary reputation,” packing an entire cosmos of domestic and professional drama into that “for ever” (187). *Frankenstein* itself is a subtle entry in Mary’s conflicted and life-long treatment of her husband’s “very anxious” incitements to enthusiastic ambition, and the force of the commentary Victor Franken-

---

33. Wolfson, “Editorial Privilege,” 39–40.

34. Wolfson, “Editorial Privilege,” 41.

35. Mary Favret, “Mary Shelley’s Sympathy and Irony: The Editor and Her Corpus,” in Fisch, Mellor, and Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley*, 17–38 (19; 27).

36. James O’Rourke, “The 1831 Introduction and Revisions to *Frankenstein*: Mary Shelley Dictates Her Legacy,” *Studies in Romanticism* 38.3 (1999): 365–85 (371).

stein produces on Percy Shelley derives, in large part, from Victor's mirroring of the pampered scion of Sir Timothy. That one of Percy's earliest, most awkward specimens of poetry was published under the pseudonym "Victor" reinforces the point: Victor Frankenstein is the darkened portrait of Shelley's juvenilities, his privileges, egotism, and self-involved rhetoric magnified as disfigurements. I don't mean to diminish the novel into an artifact of marital and professional tensions, however. I mean to historicize Paul Cantor's sense that "Mary Shelley seems to have turned the creation myth back upon Romanticism, making Romantic creativity itself, in all its problematic character, her subject."<sup>37</sup>

Percy's mystification of the social conditions and appeal of his "enthusiasm" was typical of the displacements which partly constituted a specific form of polite, masculine poetics in the Romantic era. If this discursive privilege addressed an elite Sunetoi in a problematically Southcottian rhetoric, *Frankenstein* collapses this opposition in on itself, forcing the half-hidden tracks of vulgarity to the surface in an idiom of recognizably Shelleyan distinction. Oscillating between the political poles of enthusiasm, Victor Frankenstein seizes the figures of a Romantic aesthetic, and tips them over into the popular cacophony that Percy attempted to silence in his own writings. Frankenstein's "passion arise[s], like a mountain river, from ignoble and almost forgotten sources," but his story never forgets the ignoble, and rather insists on its insuperable vitality (21). This Prometheanism is as attuned to Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* as to Aeschylus: "I trembled with excess of agitation as I said this; there was a frenzy in my manner, and something, I doubt not, of that haughty fierceness, which the martyrs of old are said to possess" (158).

*Frankenstein* is many things, and as many of its best readings remind us, the ideological patchwork of the novel admits endlessly stimulating critical interpretations, while ultimately rejecting—or at least escaping—them all.<sup>38</sup> Yet it always remains a tale of the obligations of acknowledg-

---

37. Cantor, *Creature and Creator*, 109.

38. For Marshall Brown, "monstrosity" is a figure of ontological complexity, even indeterminacy, which explains why *Frankenstein* (and its Creature) "is so easily but mistakenly allegorized into one or another material or situational problem. It implies all the cases to which critics reduce it, but remains more pervasive than any of them." Brown, "*Frankenstein*: A Child's Tale," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 36.2 (Spring 2003): 145–75 (159). For Denise Gigante, the Creature's typifying "ugliness" poses a similar critical and metaphysical conundrum to the reader, and the novel: "he symbolizes nothing but the unsymbolized: the repressed ugliness at the heart of an elaborate symbolic network that is threatened the moment he bursts on the scene, exposing to view his radically unscripted existence." Gigante, "Facing the Ugly: The Case of *Frankenstein*," *English Literary History* 67.2 (Summer 2000):

ment, confronting cultural and rhetorical authority, which carelessly sends forth emanations and re-inscriptions of its own dominance, with the hideous progeny and precursors of generative enthusiasm. The form of the Creature, at once horrifying and pathetically abject, embodies the return of every sort of psychosocial repression: the spectacular apparition of all that the ruling modernities of the early nineteenth century disappeared in the exercise of power.<sup>39</sup> My sense is that the novel's ironic revelation of the cohabitation of religious and poetical enthusiasm is an important part, but not the whole, of this pursuit of high romanticism—even into its most sacred sites, Chamonix and Cumberland—by what it has tried to abandon and deny: but I don't want to allegorize this oppositional identity in the meeting of Victor Frankenstein and his Creature.

My Creature isn't the immiserated incarnation of enthusiasm haunting its genteel other, but the novel's most relentless, and relentlessly sad, proponent of all the discourses of Enlightenment which ought to elevate a subjectivity capable of harnessing them. Victor himself is sufficient as his own doppelganger, continually performing the discursive schizophrenia which tears him from sanity to madness, sexual mastery to hysteria, and politeness to enthusiastic vulgarity, a personal and political unsteadiness that Walton documents: "Sometimes he commanded his countenance and tones, and related the most horrible incidents with a tranquil voice, suppressing every mark of agitation; then, like a volcano bursting forth, his face would suddenly change to an expression of the wildest rage, as he shrieked out imprecations on his persecutor" (165). Seeing the Creature as a reflection of Victor's own monstrosity is a motivated vision, which Victor's boundless narcissism is eager to frame. The Creature's enduring burden is to be read as symbol rather than subject, representing everything other than himself, encased in a narrative which testifies only to his lack of autonomy. For most of the novel, Frankenstein is the lone enthusiast, plagued by demons and haunted by sin, and if Creature relates to creator, it's to relay the antinomian refusal of the terms of his own constitution, which Victor himself recognizes toward the end: "In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature" (173).

---

565–87 (567).

39. Lee Sterrenburg's account of *Frankenstein* and revolutionary discourse remains seminal; see his "Mary Shelley's Monster: Politics and Psyche in *Frankenstein*," in Levine and Knoepfelmacher, *Endurance of Frankenstein*, 143–71. For a fascinating account of education and slave narratives in the novel, see John Bugg, "'Master of their language': Education and Exile in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68.4 (2005): 655–66.

This tension, between creative enthusiasm and created rationalism, is the tragic key to *Frankenstein*, as enlightened positions and strategies are gradually overwhelmed—often over their very powerful protests—by an increasingly fanatical enthusiasm which consumes, co-opts, and re-determines the outlets for Reason and rational subjectivity. The Creature wishes very much he shared a story merely with a scientist, however mad. Instead, Victor’s enthusiasm forces him to submit to a narrative of moral warfare and metaphysical violence, which casts the Creature as the “Devil”: at once the Adversary, and, in another of its Romantic-era meanings, the lowest agent in textual assembly, trapped in a narrative over which he has no control.

## Raising the Dead

“Natural philosophy,” Victor insists, “is the genius which has regulated my fate” (21). But this is a peculiarly fatalistic “genius,” as the word equivocates between an expansively self-congratulatory view of Frankenstein’s scientific aptitude, and the providential ministrations of a spiritual intelligence neither natural nor particularly philosophical. The quality of the epistemological and affective “regulation” of Victor’s narrative—whether this is an account governed by the fixed laws of matter and motion, or by forces more darkly arcane—is thus called into question as soon as it’s raised, though in fact the issue is settled quickly. Frankenstein’s skepticism, such as it is, is ultimately an agent for his credulity. Mary Shelley elaborates this frame of evaluation in the 1831 text, where Victor’s initial course selection at the University of Ingolstadt was guided by something even more malevolent than the whims of the Registrar:

Chance—or rather the evil influence, the Angel of Destruction, which asserted omnipotent sway over me from the moment I turned my reluctant steps from my father’s door—led me first to Mr. Krempe, professor of natural philosophy. He was an uncouth man, but deeply imbued with the secrets of his science. (202)

Always a devout believer that physiology is ontology, Victor doubly recoils from this “squat little man” with a “repulsive countenance,” and from his equally ill-formed “doctrines” (28). But the attending “Angel” (aided by the sagely handsome Waldman) recalls the young heretic to both magisterium and magister, since the “professor” holds forth the prospect, not of

knowledge exactly, but of adeptal mysteries and “secrets,” which one does not study, but with which one might be “deeply imbued.” To the initiated, “natural” philosophy reveals the supernatural, and Victor learns the zeal of a convert, as his “apathy . . . soon changed . . . into enthusiasm,” and a “new light seemed to dawn upon my mind” (22). His experimental ambition to “pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation” provokes a moral struggle which descends with a Calvinist certainty. These were “words of the fate, enounced to destroy me,” “as if my soul were grappling with a palpable enemy” (202). Once acquired, Victor’s “palpable” faith in a world motivated by spiritual rather than physical causes moves him from his mountains, transforming his pursuit of the Creature across Tartary into a trek across Tartarus: “I was cursed by some devil, and carried about with me my eternal hell; yet still a spirit of good followed and directed my steps, and, when I most murmured, would suddenly extricate me from seemingly insurmountable difficulties” (160).

It was just this sort of worldview which distinguished a “reasonable” man from his enthusiastic other. Thomas Thomason pronounced in 1795 that the rational Christian, sensitive to the “immutable . . . obligations to virtue,” enjoyed an emotional stability and metaphysical consistency unknown to the overheated imaginary of “enthusiasm”: “No envious daemon can rob us of our happiness; no propitious guardian avert the punishment of our sins.”<sup>40</sup> To be sure, personal ecstasies and cosmic influences weren’t wholly antithetical to Frankenstein’s position as scientist. In 1815, the *Edinburgh Review* began a discussion of Southcott by suggesting a union between certain forms of religious rapture and scientific delusion:

Even in cases where the greatest calmness and deliberation might be expected, and among those whose profession it is to investigate truth,—the ambition of forming a sect, or displaying intellectual superiority, . . . and the anxiety to penetrate the mysterious secrets of nature,—have sometimes produced, not modest querists and patient inquirers, but zealous believers in the most fanciful creeds of philosophy.<sup>41</sup>

This language of scientific penetration finds an eerie echo in Frankenstein, who is “embued with a fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature” (199). But as John Wesley averred in his *Survey of the Wisdom*

---

40. Thomas Thomason, *An Essay Tending to Prove that the Holy Scriptures, Rightly Understood, Do Not Give Encouragement to Enthusiasm or Superstition*, 21.

41. “Joanna Southcott,” *Edinburgh Review* 24 (February 1815): 453–71 (454).

of *God in Creation*—a work adapted from the writings of a professor at the University of Jena in 1770—this doubling of the experimental and the enthusiastic was as old as the introduction of “the Knowledge of Chemistry into Europe,” when men emerged who “were wise above the Age they lived in; and penetrated so far into the secret Recesses of Nature, as scarce to escape the Suspicion of Magic. Such were Roger Bacon and Albertus Magnus.”<sup>42</sup>

The enthusiastic scientist, infected with moral and intellectual pathologies so acute they could only be diagnosed as theological defects, was a recognizable type, and Victor Frankenstein a legible instance. Isaac Taylor documented the predictable progress of the disorder in his *Natural History of Enthusiasm* (1829). Deranged zeal produced self-involvement, which culminated in an icy death:

[T]hey become a freezing centre of solitary and unsocial indulgence; and at length displace every emotion that deserves to be called virtuous. No cloak of selfishness is in fact more impenetrable than that which usually envelops a pampered imagination.<sup>43</sup>

As if anticipating this chilly forecast, Victor warms himself with “enthusiasm” for Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus, and Albertus Magnus (22), of whom the latter two were especially beloved by young Percy Shelley. While his subsequent university training is itself problematically superstitious, Frankenstein’s generative interests and influences—by another name, his “genius”—were inescapably ancient. His “science,” on the cutting edge of the fifteenth century, may not so much represent a grim warning against unchecked technological modernization, as testify to the enduring power of shadowy doctrines in an Enlightenment purporting to banish them.<sup>44</sup>

Yet Victor is also somewhat disingenuous when he suggests, “[i]t may appear very strange, that a disciple of Albertus Magnus should arise in the eighteenth century” (23). His unholy trinity of enthusiastic scripture in fact possessed an energetic position in “modern” Europe, and there were many such disciples, as Richard Graves grumbled in his anti-Methodist novel,

42. John Wesley, *Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*, 1:9–10.

43. Isaac Taylor, *Natural History of Enthusiasm* [London, 1829], 4th ed. (New York: J. Leavitt, 1834), 15.

44. See especially Jones, *Against Technology*, 105–36. See also *Frankenstein’s Science: Experimentation and Discovery in Romantic Culture, 1780–1830*, ed. Christina Knellwolf and Jane Goodall (Aldershot; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), which attempts to move the discussion of “science” in the novel beyond “masculinity” and “hubris.”

*The Spiritual Quixote*: “our modern itinerant reformers, by the mere force of imagination, have conjured up the powers of darkness in an enlightened age.”<sup>45</sup> All three philosophers were foundational for the folk cultures of alchemy and magic that, as J. F. C. Harrison remarks, “provided a matrix in which millenarian yearnings could be nourished” well into the nineteenth century, while Jakob Boehme, a shoemaker and “the greatest inspiration to mystics in the eighteenth century, [and] the name most frequently mentioned as exemplar,” was characterized by “his use of the vocabulary and symbolism of alchemy, astrology, and humoral physiology,” centerpieces of Frankenstein’s education.<sup>46</sup> Even accounting for flashes of popularizing showmanship like Boyle’s air-pump experiment, it’s not at all clear that many English people, beyond those literate, urban, middle-class (and often Dissenting) men and women who composed a demographic minority, thought themselves citizens of a world of accelerating scientific materialism. “Older” forms of knowledge were still quite contemporary in many parts of the country, where the “modern” was either unknown or not entirely secure; Keith Thomas has found a Cornish doctor seriously endorsing the virtues of alchemy as a moral and intellectual endeavor in 1784, and in 1804, an Anglican vicar treating a witch’s curse on his sick child with a phylactery.<sup>47</sup>

If such practices were curious oddities among professionals and the orthodox toward the end of the eighteenth century, plebeian—and especially Methodist—culture relied upon them very heavily until much later.<sup>48</sup> John Wesley’s *Primitive Physic*, first published in 1747, would become one of the best-selling books of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, going through twenty-four editions in Wesley’s lifetime alone. A manual of folk medicine, it prescribed marigold flowers (eaten “as a salad”) for the plague, and cold baths for cancer (“this has cured many”).<sup>49</sup> Success wasn’t always unqualified, and as Alexander Knox wrote to Robert Southey, “an unfortunate mistake” in one of Wesley’s “medical prescriptions . . . was at one time brought against him as involving virtual guilt of homicide.”<sup>50</sup> But such unfortunate outcomes did little to dampen the enthusiasm of Wesley and the Wesleys for an amalgamated array of natural and supernatural

---

45. Richard Graves, *The Spiritual Quixote: or, the summer’s ramble of Mr. Geoffrey Wildgoose*, 3 vols. (London: J. Dodsley, 1773), 1:57.

46. J. F. C. Harrison, *Second Coming*, 39, 19, 21.

47. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 271–76.

48. See James Obelkevitch, *Religion and Rural Society*.

49. John Wesley, *Primitive Physic: or, An Easy and Natural Method of Curing Most Diseases*, 24th ed. (London: Paramore, 1792); for marigold, 82; cancer, 33.

50. Knox, “Remarks,” 298.

treatments. Southey alleged that the itinerant preachers and their wives were commonly employed in “making and vending pills, drops, balsams, or medicines” that they would retail to their congregations,<sup>51</sup> while some “perfected” preachers offered more personal cures, proposing to manage eye infections by spitting in them while saying magic words.<sup>52</sup> Wesley himself indulged in his own Frankenscience, championing the rejuvenating powers of electrotherapy in *The Desideratum: Or Electricity Made Plain and Useful* (1790), while owning—and using upon his devoted flock—one of the very first copies of Franklin’s “electricity machine” in the world.<sup>53</sup>

Folk magic, faith healing, and the electricity of enthusiasm: this is at least as much Victor’s purview as the increasingly formalized life sciences, and Professor Krempe rightly glosses the quality of his early studies, labeling him a young man “who, but a few years ago, believed Cornelius Agrippa as firmly as the gospel” (46). But if Frankenstein outgrows Agrippa at Ingolstadt, “gospel”—especially in its most theologically extreme and socially debased readings—remains his guiding light throughout his exercise in creation. Moreover, “creation,” capacious as it is, is perhaps not the most satisfying discourse for representing the “catastrophe” which takes place “on a dreary night of November” (37). While this is an event, as so much strong criticism has taught, supercharged with the anxieties of sexuality, gender, and reproduction, it’s not only a “birth myth.” These are, after all, the practices and categories which Victor is sedulously determined to avoid and subvert, which in absence and opposition make their critical presence felt. Such denials may imprint in negative a secularized fable of technology displacing physiology, but it seems to me that what Frankenstein does is as important as what he doesn’t do. In short, Victor raises the dead. While this event directly (and often, to the unconverted, revoltingly) intersected with representations of sexuality and birth in the long eighteenth century, it’s ultimately Resurrection, in all its theological and social complexity, rather than pregnancy or its scientific surrogate, which comes closest to capturing the crisis of the novel.

Above all others, Resurrection was the animating miracle for almost every form of Christianity. In 1791, Joseph Priestley published *An Address*

---

51. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 2:151. For a powerful account of Methodist practices for the healthy and unhealthy body, as well as the differing theological significances of health and illness for men and women, see Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment*, 171–96.

52. See Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 334–42.

53. On the machine, see Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment*, 13. See also Abelove, *Evangelist of Desire*, 27–29, for the Methodist interest in electric reanimation.

to the Methodists along with some *Original Letters by the Reverend John Wesley and His Friends*, winning few friends among the Addressed, as both pamphlets assassinated the character of Wesley while impugning the sanity of his Society. Yet despite these frictions, Priestley insisted, Socinians and enthusiasts were still bound by the basic consensus which conditioned the Western world, a faith in Christ's once-and-future conquest of death:

All Christians, of every denomination, believe that whatever Christ himself was, his mission was divine, and that whatever he taught was from God. They all believe that he wrought unquestionable miracles, that he died, and he rose again from the dead, and that he will come to raise all the dead, and to give unto every man according to his works.<sup>54</sup>

Theological unity only went so far, and in his *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (1777), Priestley carefully demurred whether the indubitable historical fact of resurrection was still a contemporary possibility. While it was certain that “whatever is *decomposed* may certainly be *recomposed*, by the same almighty power that first composed it,” it was inconsonant with the divine order for such effects to occur again before the end of history.<sup>55</sup> Only madmen, liars, and the woefully stupid believed in anything like a modern form of the ancient magic.

As Priestley smugly implied to the Methodists mourning the recent death of their beloved Father, they were likely all three: “At this time, I hope there are none of you who believe, as Mr. Wesley originally did, in a miraculous new birth, depending on the sole will of God.”<sup>56</sup> This was no innocently speculative “hope”: Priestley was knowingly aggravating the nerve at the center of Methodist theology. Even as Wesley (and his heirs) squashed or ejected the lunatic fringe orbiting the Connexion, from which occasional claims to literal powers of resurrection would emerge, mainstream Wesleyanism returned again and again to the “new birth,” the metaphorical—yet still dramatically embodied—corollary of the original miracle. As Wesley's *Journal* shows, two passages favored in his foundational sermons anticipate *Frankenstein's* narrative of creation: “If any man

---

54. Joseph Priestley, *An Address to the Methodists*, in *Theological and Miscellaneous Writings of Joseph Priestley*, ed. John Towhill Rutt, 25 vols. (London: Smallfield, 1817–32), 25:333–34.

55. Joseph Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit* (London: J. Johnson, 1777), 161.

56. Priestley, *An Address to the Methodists*, in *Theological and Miscellaneous Works*, 25:334.

be in Christ, he is a new creature” (2 Corinthians 5:17), and “The hour cometh, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live again” (John 5:25).<sup>57</sup>

This “new birth” was the operative conceit of Methodism, the spiritual reanimation of the old body, wasted and scarred by sin:

Unto you I call in the name of him whom you crucify afresh, and in his words to your circumcised predecessors, “Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell?”

4. How indeed, except ye be born again! For ye are now dead in trespasses and sins.<sup>58</sup>

The resurrection of “a dead Christian” into “a living man” was the cleansing of the doors of perception, as Wesley suggested in another sermon:

While a man is in a mere natural state, before he is born of God, he has, in a spiritual sense, eyes and sees not; a thick impenetrable veil lies upon them. He has ears, but hears not; he is utterly deaf to what he is most of all concerned to hear. His other spiritual senses are all locked up. . . . But as soon as he is born of God there is a total change in all these particulars. The “eyes of his understanding are opened” (such is the language of the great Apostle). And he who of old “commanded light to shine out of darkness shining on his heart,” he sees “the light of the glory of God,” his glorious love, “in the face of Jesus Christ.”<sup>59</sup>

“Light,” “love,” “glory” were the formulae by which new creatures often recognized their new births. As Peter Jaco recalled in 1778, his conversion was “a moment” that “seemed to me as though a new creation had taken place. . . . My soul was filled with light and love.”<sup>60</sup> In 1781, Christopher Hopper remembered his own “glorious and undeniable change.”<sup>61</sup> Methodist spiritual transfigurations paralleled, in rhetoric if not doctrinal agenda, the experience that dots Percy Shelley’s poetry, in which Ianthe

---

57. John Wesley, *The Journal of the Reverend John Wesley*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1938), 1:441, 449. “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature” was the text for Wesley’s first sermon upon returning from America.

58. John Wesley, “The Marks of the New Birth” [1746], in *Sermons I*: 1–33 [1746–60], ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1985), 429.

59. John Wesley, “The New Birth” [1746], in *Sermons II*, 192.

60. WV 2:10.

61. WV 1:118.

symptomatically “knew her glorious change, / And felt in apprehension uncontrolled, / New raptures opening round” (*Queen Mab* I:192–94).

The Wesleyan “new birth” was often more darkly ambiguous in quality, ineluctably linked to birthing “Pangs.” In the words of one convert that Southey recorded, “as my mother bore me with great pain, so did I feel great pain in my soul in being born of God.”<sup>62</sup> This transposition of the trauma of birth from mother to son has some resonance for the scrambled reproductive roles in *Frankenstein*, and even when not explicitly sexual, the “new birth” was often viscerally physical, re-enacting in the flesh the spiritual transformations of the sinner, and of Christ. As Wesley observed of a congregation in 1786, “several drop down as dead, and are as stiff as a corpse. But in a while they start up and cry, ‘Glory! Glory!’ perhaps twenty times together.”<sup>63</sup> Such physical effects often intensified into actual disfigurements. Pseudo-resurrection could monsterize before it might save, and “swollen tongues and necks,” veins “swelled as if ready to burst” for “some hours,” and demoniacal strength that could require “as many as seven men” to restrain were all acceptable, and familiar, proofs.<sup>64</sup> This rebirth, as Ronald Knox remarked in his (somewhat contemptuous) study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century enthusiasm, was the radical annihilation of nature, the fabrication of the physically and metaphysically alien:

[T]he assumption of the enthusiast is bolder, and simpler; for him, grace has destroyed nature, and replaced it. The saved man has come out into a new order of being, with a new set of faculties, which are proper to his state.<sup>65</sup>

In the critical event—the reanimation of a monstrously disfigured body—Mary Shelley affiliates the “glorious change” in Percy’s visionary aesthetic with the forcible resurrections of enthusiasm.

Frankenstein’s search for the mysteries of reanimation rebounds to himself, as the scientist is “animated by an almost supernatural enthusiasm” throughout his labors (32). But it’s his refusal to publish his methodology that most clearly casts him beyond the scientific pale. “The

62. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 1:203.

63. Wesley, *Journal and Diaries* I, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, 67–68.

64. Wesley, *Journal and Diaries* I, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, 526–28.

65. R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion, with Special Reference to the XVII and XVIII Centuries* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 3.

Methodists are peculiarly attached to mysteries,” groused Leigh Hunt, conclusive evidence of their “Ignorance and Vulgarly,”<sup>66</sup> and Frankenstein chides Walton while denying him the final revelation: “I see by your eagerness, and the wonder and hope which your eyes express, my friend, that you expect to be informed of the secret with which I am acquainted; that cannot be” (33). Percy Shelley had focused some skeptical notes to *Queen Mab* on the manufactured mysteries of life and death, reading chicanery in precisely the behavior Mary Shelley would give to Frankenstein:

But even supposing that a man should raise a dead body to life before our own eyes, and on this fact rest his claim to being considered the son of God;—the Humane Society restores drowned persons, and because it makes no mystery of the method it employs, its members are not mistaken for the sons of God.<sup>67</sup>

Although Frankenstein’s self-aggrandizement stops short of a claim for full divinity, his scene of creation evokes both Shelleyan and Methodist enthusiasm. The implied critique offered in its notes notwithstanding, *Queen Mab* opens with the rapture “How wonderful is death” (I:1)—a sentiment amplified for Frankenstein in a frenzied quest that causes him to “have recourse to death” (32), to “[dabble] among the unhallowed damp of the grave” (35), and to yearn for the “deep, dark, death-like solitude” (65) of the grave as the necessary preludes to the work of resurrection. What for Percy Shelley had been an object of contemplation for the philosopher-poet becomes for Frankenstein a passionate obsession. But if Mary Shelley pathologizes his fascination with death, necrophilia is not Frankenstein’s peculiar deviance—it was one of enthusiasm’s most remarkable axioms.

Methodism’s map of desire was experimentally ambiguous, “apt to confuse,” as Jon Mee puts it, “agape and eros, imaging sexual love in gross terms, and barely managing, if at all, to sublimate sexual desire into religious devotion.”<sup>68</sup> The famous Methodist “Love-Feasts” were (sadly) falsely advertised, usually characterized by no physical love and less feasting. Nevertheless, the myth of the secret sexualities of the initiated provided salacious opportunities for anti-Methodists to condemn, while voyeuristically savoring, the immorality of the Society. *The Love Feast: A Poem* (1778) regaled its readers with Gothic scenes “of mysterious

66. Hunt, *An Attempt*, Essay I: “On the Ignorance and Vulgarly of the Methodists,” 302.

67. Shelley’s Note 15 to *Queen Mab*; *Complete Poetical Works*, 1:322.

68. *Romanticism, Enthusiasm, and Regulation*, 52.

Lewdness and Debauchery,” staffed only by “*the particular select Societies of Fanatics*,” as the “*main Bodies* are not admitted to these *midnight Mysteries*.”<sup>69</sup> The Rev. Polwhele took as “indisputably proved . . . the connection between enthusiasm and lust, or the easy transition from (the methodistic) spiritual love to carnal desire,” relating an *Eve* of strangely Keatsian seduction:

At *St. Agnes*, the society stay up the whole night, when girls of twelve and fourteen years of age, run about the streets; call out, “that they are possess’d.” . . . At a nocturnal meeting at *Mawgan*, a short time since, a girl upon her knees, praying, was seized by some one—*gently* I suppose—and a cry was soon heard “that he was kissing her.”<sup>70</sup>

Polwhele’s mendacity was rivaled only by his capacity to discover sexual outrage in unlikely situations; he memorably banned “unsex’d females” from the biological sciences, since the “bliss botanic” would make “bosoms heave,” and lead them to “pluck forbidden fruit, with mother Eve.”<sup>71</sup> More sober commentators such as Southey, while holding it “absurd to believe that any open and scandalous acts of licentiousness are committed at these meetings,” nevertheless thought “he must wilfully shut his eyes, who does not perceive what consequences are likely to arise when the assembly breaks up, and the members, in that state of bodily excitement to which they have been wrought, are left to return home in the dead of the night, and in what company they chuse.”<sup>72</sup>

Southey’s anxieties were heteronormative, but Henry Abelove argues that “sodomy was a Methodist practice.”<sup>73</sup> The Society clearly authorized

---

69. Anon., *The Love-Feast: A Poem*, 8.

70. Polwhele, *Anecdotes*, v, 38. Polwhele also accused Methodist itinerants of a sort of proto-Byronism, with one “James Stephens, alias *Duffens*, . . . of a notoriously bad character” figuring as *Lara avant la lettre*: “He has gone his rounds for several years, generally accompanied by a young woman in man’s cloaths” (39).

71. Richard Polwhele, *The unsex’d females*, lines 29–30.

72. Southey, “On the Evangelical Sects,” 496–97. Southey was particularly distressed by the potentially erotic self-examinations practiced in class and band meetings. Women “who have actually any vicious propensities, will soon learn to extract a guilty pleasure from these meetings; they will listen to the avowal of others and recall the thoughts of impurity in themselves with delight; in them the act of confession will be but a repetition of the offence; their inordinate passions will thus be stimulated and strengthened; and the very means devised for keeping them holy accelerate their ruin . . . we do affirm that their practice of confession is likely to make more street-walkers than their preaching reclaims” (499).

73. Abelove, *Evangelist of Desire*, 67.

intense, and intensely bodily, bonding between same-sex converts, and such connections were often more real—if less visible to hostile contemporaries—than the familiar fantasies of “Lewdness and Debauchery.” For Sampson Staniforth, the ecstasy of his “new birth” was an awakening into unexpected affective possibilities, which reconfigured and overwhelmed normative relationship roles. A chance acquaintance in the army swiftly became his “dear companion,” who “took me by the hand, and led to a place erected about half a mile from the camp”; after the service, “my dear companion took me in his arms,” and then “took me to be with him as his comrade, and watched over me as a tender parent over a beloved child.”<sup>74</sup> In striking compression, this affection exploits and chafes against the emotional opportunities and limits of the positions of parent, child, comrade, and companionate spouse, while attempting to occupy each role simultaneously; within a few days, this social, sexual, and spiritual confusion had brought Staniforth from joy to despair, and it “was strongly suggested to me that my day of grace was past, that I had sinned the unpardonable sin, and it signified nothing to strive any longer.”<sup>75</sup>

Yet these affective enthusiasms were restrained compared with the desire of many Methodists for the suffering, and most especially, the dead, body. Boyd Hilton suggests that the “crucicentrism” (the focus on Christ’s agony on the Cross) central to Methodism and Anglican Evangelicalism gave doctrinal sanction for “revelling in pain as though it were a mark of grace.”<sup>76</sup> The Wesleyans relished gruesomely detailed accounts of decomposition as *sic transits*, which terrified sinners into the hope of salvation:

[I]n its grave [the body] turns yellow, then black, then it is covered in white mould—a putrid liquid flows, from which crowds of worms are bred. The worms first devour the flesh, then another. The skeleton becomes dust. Soon it will happen to you.<sup>77</sup>

So warned *A Week’s Meditations on the Four Last Things* in 1845, and if many mainstream Victorian churches had begun to use death in order to market the appeal of life-after-death, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such morbidities were still firmly, and often horrifically, associated with the Methodists and even more outré enthusiasts. The

74. WV 1:70–72.

75. WV 1:74. For a sensitive account of Methodist “women in love,” see Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment*, 127–70.

76. Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, 10.

77. Quoted in Knight, *Nineteenth-Century Church*, 49.

Wesleyans often evidenced compulsive affection for corpses, a celebration of the resurrection displaced onto (and sometimes entirely eclipsed by) a love for the resurrected object, as a few lines from a hymn by Charles Wesley may indicate:

Ah, lovely appearance of death!  
 What sight upon Earth is so fair?  
 Not all the gay pageants that breathe  
 Can with a dead body compare.  
 With solemn delight I survey  
 The corpse when the spirit is fled,  
 In love with the beautiful clay,  
 And longing to lie in its stead.<sup>78</sup>

The dissonance between the rhyme-paired *Death* and *breathe*, and the casting of life as lifeless pageant, enacts the peculiar ugliness of the living. But death was not simply aesthetically superior: it was uniquely sacred, the more outlandishly described, the better. Methodists and the related Moravians—“who,” according to Hunt, “(to do them justice) seem of all Methodists to have the least guidance of common sense”<sup>79</sup>—stressed that resurrection necessitated a passionate involvement with death, and that the killing wound was also the saving womb; the good Christian was “the worm” who must find “Lodging, Bed and Board in the Lamb’s Womb.”<sup>80</sup>

The Moravians, self-described “wound-worms,” developed a theo-sexual fascination with the mutilated corpse (and specifically with the gash in Christ’s side that doubled as a vagina) that makes Frankenstein seem decorous:

[T]he dearest little opening of the sacred, precious, and thousand times beautiful little side. . . . It is in this opening the Regenerate rests and breathes. It is there he has his country, his house, his room, his little table. It is there he eats and drinks. It is there in a word he lives.<sup>81</sup>

78. Hymn 47, from *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge, with the assistance of James Dale (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984), 138.

79. Hunt, *An Attempt*, Essay II: “On the hatred of the Methodists against Moral Preaching,” *Examiner* 20 (May 15, 1808): 318. Early in his career, John Wesley was heavily influenced by the Moravians, living with them in Georgia, making a pilgrimage to them in Germany, and studying with them in London.

80. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, 371.

81. Quoted in Knox, *Enthusiasm*, 414–46.

Southey was unable to restrain himself in the face of such “freaks of perverted fancy, the abominations of the Phallus and Lingam”: “madness never gave birth to combinations of more monstrous and blasphemous obscenity, than they did in their fantastic allegories and spiritualizations.”<sup>82</sup> Scholars sympathetic to Methodism have tended to downplay the Society’s transgenering of Christ, and its eroticization of death,<sup>83</sup> but they were both important components of the movement’s theology, attested to by extraordinarily influential figures rather than isolated extremists. Wesley sang of his “thirst” for the “wounded Lamb of God,” and his need to “wash me in thy cleansing blood; / To dwell within thy wounds,”<sup>84</sup> while Whitefield, in a moment of ecstasy regretted by Bishop Lavington, “sweetly sucked on my *Saviour’s bosom, sucked* out of the breasts of his *Consolation*.”<sup>85</sup> E. P. Thompson was sometimes ungenerous in his engagement with Methodism, but he was not wrong to hear in its theology the same promise which chillingly thrills Victor Frankenstein, “*I will be with you on your wedding-night*”: “No Methodist or evangelical magazine, for the mature or for children, was complete without its death-bed scene in which . . . death was often anticipated in the language of bride or bridegroom impatient for the wedding-night.”<sup>86</sup>

## The Voice of the Devil

Whether hidden in a garret in a university town, or lurking on the most forsaken outpost of the Gaelic periphery, Frankenstein’s psycho-sexual innovations still kept a very wide acquaintance: the reconstitution of life from the wreckage of death, through an erotic syntax which confounded masculine and feminine roles even in the body of God, was not an unspeakably alienated act of technological transgression, but one of the most infamously recognizable pieties of enthusiastic Christianity

---

82. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 1:188.

83. Mack’s *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment* is a strong exception; as she argues, the emphasis on Christ’s blood and womb, which mortified a long line of men from Leigh Hunt to E. P. Thompson, had a very different value for many Methodist women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

84. *A Collection of Hymns, For the Use of the People Called Methodists*, ed. John Wesley (London: J. Patmore, 1780), 31.

85. Lavington, *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists, Compar’d*, 54. For later versions of the religious gothic, most especially in *Dracula*, see Christopher Herbert, “Vampire Religion,” *Representations* 79.1 (Summer 2002): 100–121.

86. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, 374.

in the long eighteenth century. At times, Victor is nervously alert to this theo-social community, as unwelcome as his own offspring. Surveying the scraps of his aborted female creature, he “reflected that I ought not to leave the relics of my work to excite the horror and suspicion of the peasants” (135), as their vulgar superstition might seize such “relics” as grotesque remnants of some misbegotten beatification, rather than cast-off material from biochemical experiments. Yet even as he worries that the benighted “peasants” will misrecognize (and so recognize) the inspirited quality of his “work,” Victor himself seems to expect this reception for his firstborn.

His anti-Petrarchan blazon—“His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness” (37)—renders a grim parody of the Word made flesh. The resulting Resurrection, of course, is utterly divorced from Redemption. Not joy but “breathless horror and disgust” immediately “filled my heart,” says the creator (37). Ardor is extinguished by horror at the “demoniacal corpse”: “the change was so rapid, the overthrow so complete” (38). But if the tenor has shifted, the “demoniacal” discourse remains the same. Frankenstein’s “science” had always been equivocal, disguising popular intensities in professional acumen—but whatever tenuous claim to cultural distinction might be drawn from the science fiction of creation, it’s overwhelmed by the raw enthusiasm of Victor’s subsequent relationship with his Creature. To label Frankenstein a sublimely incompetent parent doesn’t go far enough: he’s beyond the extravagantly Oedipal. The “pangs” of every “New Birth,” as the Methodist preachers reminded their flocks time and again, were those of the sinner’s struggle with Satan. Every conversion story would ultimately find itself within the genre of the psychomachia, and so, too, does Frankenstein’s story. What Victor (to his own mind) has crafted is nothing short of an incarnation of the Devil, set for fatal combat, waged with ferocious enthusiasm, for salvation.

“I began the creation of a human being,” Victor confides with some satisfaction, though, much to the chagrin of creator and created alike, he never quite gets around to finishing one (34). This initial admission of the Creature’s essential humanity, in authorial intent if not effect, degrades even in the primal scene, as “the lifeless thing” animates into “the creature,” only to tumble down the great chain of being in just a few paragraphs, passing “wretch” and “miserable monster” on its way to “demoniacal corpse” (37–38). Once arrived, Victor’s conviction of demonic influence sets in with the force of dogma. Not that his faith is

entirely without its doubts: Frankenstein asks that this resurrection be read against the hedge-magic he purports to have outgrown in his youth. “The raising of ghosts or devils was a promise liberally accorded by my favorite authors, the fulfilment of which I most eagerly sought; and if my incantations were always unsuccessful, I attributed the failure rather to my own inexperience and mistake, than to a want of skill or fidelity in my instructors,” and many critics have accepted Frankenstein’s critique of his thaumaturgical roots (23). According to Marshall Brown, “whatever one may say about *Frankenstein*, its monster is, assuredly, no ghost,” a being “supernatural only in the older and weaker sense, quantitatively impressive, not qualitatively alien.”<sup>87</sup> Chris Baldick insists that the “absence of any demonic tempter” removes “the Faust myth from our list of sources”: if “Victor calls his creature a devil and a demon,” “he knows better than anyone in the tale that the monster is not literally a paid-up and fork-carrying member of that order.”<sup>88</sup>

I’m not convinced, however, that Victor “knows better.” Shelley’s ironic argument, I think, is that if this isn’t a novel of demonic bargains and spiritual malevolence, its eponymous gentleman-scholar certainly thinks it is. Whether begotten or made, the Creature makes a good case for himself as a rational, rights-bearing subject. It’s his creator who is determined to superimpose the enthusiastic antagonism between Man and Devil onto a relationship that might have been purely secular and contractarian. As Baldick’s own math suggests,<sup>89</sup> Frankenstein’s lexicon for the Creature—varieties of “devil,” “demon,” or “fiend” appear fifty-one times, surpassing the twenty-seven instances of “monster,” and dwarfing the sixteen for “creature”—deeply entrenches a hellish sensibility. But if this is a convenient rhetoric for reprobation, it’s also a serious metaphysic, and Victor carefully forbids noncelestial categories of difference. When Walton intuits, across a snow-blinded “half a mile,” the gap between created and creator as the racialized distance between “an European” and “a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island” (12), while his lieutenant simply reports “some dogs drawing a sledge, with a man in it,” Victor is “aroused” to correct both men’s evaluations as insufficiently mystical: “he asked a multitude of questions concerning the route which the daemon, as he called him, had pursued” (14). Frankenstein is doubly eager to record both the Creature’s physical “route” over the ice, and its moral trajectory as “daemon,” and while Walton momentarily hesitates over this figura-

87. Brown, “*Frankenstein: A Child’s Tale*,” 149–50.

88. Baldick, *In Frankenstein’s Shadow*, 41.

89. Baldick, *In Frankenstein’s Shadow*, 10n1.

tion, he—like the Creature itself—ultimately acquiesces to its inevitability. The Creature, Victor catechizes, is neither natural nor unnatural, but supernatural in the extreme, motivated by a theological rather than ecological agenda.

Contemplating the consequences of his promised female, “who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal,” Frankenstein grants that she and the male Creature will axiomatically comprise a new “species.” Yet at the threshold of sexual reproduction, which would confirm the biological status of the “creature,” Victor chokes on brimstone, discovering, in the dangers of the body, the moral threat as old as the Archenemy: “one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror” (129). This is an eschatological prophecy, not a forecast of evolutionary competition, envisioning a “race of devils” whose sexuality will be that of the hungry incubus, with a “thirst” which will drain dry “the species of man.” As Southey wrote in 1817, “[i]n the school of fanaticism, many a thought . . . has been fathered upon Satan,”<sup>90</sup> a maxim which Victor seems to have taken literally by fathering the Devil, while fearing the Devil’s own erotic power. Within a few hours of its animation, Victor classes the Creature as “my enemy” (40), and within a few pages, as cosmic Enemy and Adversary.

Crucially, Frankenstein sees the Devil, not Satan, in his Creature, allowing him none of the ruined excellences of Milton’s antihero. The hegemony of “Romantic Satanism” was never as grand as the adjective implies. For many readers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *Paradise Lost* was the baseline for theological knowledge rather than its critical undoing, a second Scripture from which whatever happened to be the conventional dogma of the moment and denomination might be extracted. John Pawson, the great Methodist preacher, related in 1806 his encounter with a waiter at a rural inn, who, while a “serious young man,” was sadly old-fashioned in his reading and religion: “It was evident that the Lord had graciously visited his soul, though he had never heard a gospel sermon in his life, and had solely the Bible, the Common Prayer-Book, and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to read.”<sup>91</sup> The intellectualized arguments typical of the Godwin-Shelley circle, which, as David Simpson has suggested, “denarrativized, doctrinally deprogrammed, and depoliti-

90. Southey, “On the Life of John Wesley,” in *The Correspondent* 1.2 (London: Longman, 1817): 157–76 (162).

91. WV 4:38.

cized” the Puritan epic,<sup>92</sup> were perhaps more influential in posthumous canonization than on the uncritical faith of their contemporaries. Nevertheless, a virtuously alienated Satan, whose furious indignation indicted the fatuous certainties of a God and (especially) Church bloated on moral complacency and political malfeasance, certainly had some currency. A skeptical rhetorician straddling the limits of sacred discourse, this Satan shifted from being to exposing the degenerate underbelly of Christianity, serving as the mouthpiece for a peculiarly blasphemous strain of rationalist philosophy.

But even his admirers confessed that theirs was an unpopular vision. Hazlitt would draw the most pointed distinction between a philosophically aristocratic Satan and the orthodox Devil, whose misery was exposed by his physical monstrosity. Milton’s difference from the common convention was clear:

The deformity of Satan is only in the depravity of his will; he has no bodily deformity to excite our loathing or disgust. The horns and tail are not there, poor emblems of the unbending, unconquered spirit, of the writhing agonies within. Milton was too magnanimous and open an antagonist to support his argument by the by-tricks of a hump and cloven foot. . . . He relied on the justice of his cause, and did not scruple to give the devil his due.<sup>93</sup>

If he is to be a Devil, the Creature desperately hopes that he might be a Satan of this stamp, for whom physical deformities do not mirror moral deficiencies. But his creator isn’t as magnanimous as Hazlitt’s Milton, and Frankenstein’s narrative continually recurs to popular versions of the Devil, where the body signals hellish instinct. Dallying on his way back to Geneva following William’s murder, Victor catches a fleeting glimpse of the Creature, which is more than enough for him to construct an elaborate moral machinery:

A flash of lighting illuminated the object, and discovered its shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that it was the wretch, the filthy daemon to whom I had given life. What did he there? Could he be (I shuddered at the conception) the murderer of my brother? No

---

92. David Simpson, “Romanticism, Criticism, and Theory,” 5.

93. William Hazlitt, “On Shakspeare and Milton,” *Complete Works*, 5:65.

sooner did that idea cross my imagination, than I became convinced of its truth. . . . Nothing in human shape could have destroyed that fair child. *He* was the murderer! I could not doubt it. The mere presence of the idea was an irresistible proof of the fact. I thought of pursuing the devil. . . . (53)

Victor's conviction of the guilt of this "filthy daemon" is theological rather than forensic, hinging on an ontological proof—"the mere presence of the idea was an irresistible proof of the fact"—unlikely to be admitted even by the compromised judiciary of Geneva. Yet it was just this sort of thinking which characterized enthusiastic encounters with the Devil.

Such encounters, moreover, occurred with a frequency which disturbed the conventionally pious as well as the scattered atheists in early nineteenth-century England. Southey despised the Methodist assurance that the material was magical, and especially John Wesley's "notions of diabolical agency," which "imputed" to Satan "many of the accidents and discomforts of life,—disease, bodily hurts, storms and earthquakes, and nightmare: he believed that epilepsy was often, or always, the effect of possession,—that most madmen were demoniacs."<sup>94</sup> Attacking Wesley's personal credulity was a bit like shooting a Methodist in a barrel following Priestley's unauthorized publication in 1791 of the Wesley family's account of its resident house-ghost, "Old Jeffrey." Though the papers were smuggled to him fourth-hand by a Mr. Badcock, Priestley eagerly publicized them as a useful parable for how even "the best natural understanding, with much acquired knowledge" could be insufficiently "guarded against this species of enthusiasm," which would certainly cause the Wesleyans to renounce Wesley: "This very publication will convince you that you who are now called Methodists, are a very different set of people, and much more rational, than those were first distinguished by that name. . . . You will lament as much as I do the wild extravagance of your predecessors, and will conduct yourselves by very different maxims."<sup>95</sup>

Priestley was operating in bad faith, snidely humiliating the Society while praising them as "a very different set of people" from the man they idolized. But as Southey argued—and as Priestley knew perfectly well—this faith in devilish and ghostly presences was hardly confined to Wesley. The Laureate sardonically observed of *A Short Account of God's Dealings with Mr. John Haime*, "Satan has so much to do in the narrative, that this

94. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 2:137.

95. *Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, 25:331–33.

is certainly a misnomer.”<sup>96</sup> “No Devil, No God” had been a lynchpin of many Protestant theologies for centuries, and Percy Shelley himself sneered that “the vulgar are all Manicheans,” since a firm belief in the Devil is “all that remains of the popular superstition” of darker ages.<sup>97</sup> William Sharp, the great engraver responsible for the portrait of Southcott presented as this book’s frontispiece, was scandalized by a skepticism that denied the Devil as well as God:

for a man innocently to become the sport of fools, in these days, cannot be any matter of surprise, when the existence of God is denied by some; and the existence of a Devil is treated by numbers as a phantom.<sup>98</sup>

The enthusiastic Devil was no phantom, but a familiar of natural violence. It’s telling that Mary Shelley has Frankenstein nearly always meet his “fiend” in thunder, lightning, or in rain, often attempting the sort of physicalized relations which Southey found so contemptible in Haime, who told how “one day, as I was walking alone, and faintly crying for mercy, suddenly such a hot blast of brimstone flashed in my face as almost took away my breath. And presently after, as I was walking, an invisible power struck up my heels, and threw me violently upon my face.”<sup>99</sup>

But the Devil was most popular as an intimate antagonist, with none of the towering sublimity of Milton’s Satan. He might appear, as he did to Southcott early in her career, at tea-time, greeting her, “Thou infamous bitch!”<sup>100</sup> Methodism’s relationship with the Devil was quite as intense as its involvement with Christ, and the two were theologically inseparable: salvation in the one could come only through a war with the other. This was warfare as common (many Methodists, perhaps thousands, experienced these “spiritual slayings” every year) as it was brutal. Minor hysterias—“convulsions, tremblings, jumping, laughing”—were matched by spectacular violence ostensibly against the Devil and his minions, such as that witnessed by Samuel Keimer, a young painter:

Another time I have seen my sister, who is a lusty woman, fling another prophethess upon the floor, and under agitations, tread upon her breast,

---

96. Southey, *Life of Wesley*, 2:90.

97. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “On the Devil, and Devils,” in *Complete Works*, ed. Ingpen and Peck, 7:87.

98. William Sharp, *An Answer to the World* (London: S. Rousseau, 1804), 3.

99. *WV* 1:41.

100. Joanna Southcott, *A Dispute Between the Woman and the Powers of Darkness* [1802], ed. Jonathan Wordsworth (Poole and New York: Woodstock Books, 1995), 23.

belly, legs, etc, walking several times backwards and forwards over her, and stamping upon her with violence. This was adjudged to be a sign of the fall of the whore of Babylon.<sup>101</sup>

The psychomachia could sometimes be used as psychology: Ann Underwood, Southcott's amanuensis, remarked, "that all derangement proceeds from the working of evil spirits."<sup>102</sup> But its explanatory powers were constrained by a set of performances that usually followed a tight script: "there is a cry, or a roar; usually (not always) the afflicted person drops to the ground . . . Satan is letting his prey go with the utmost reluctance."<sup>103</sup>

Frankenstein's seemingly peculiar hysteria conforms in detail to this enthusiastic semiotic, as he doggedly physicalizes his internal struggles: "I had always experienced relief from mental torment in bodily exercise" (155). The immediate sequel to the creation—a dream that merges the corpses of Elizabeth and Frankenstein's mother in an Oedipal fugue—channels the necrophilia strongly stamped by the doctrines of Methodism, and his encounter at the foot of his bed with "the miserable monster whom I created" is a stock scene for devilish confrontations:

I then waking, and being alone in the Chamber, fancy'd I heard some *rushing Kind of Noise*, and discern'd something at the *Bed's-Foot* like a *shadow*; which I apprehended to have been a *Spirit*. Hereupon, I was seiz'd with *great Fear* and *Trembling*, rose in Haste, went forth into the *Outer-Chamber* in *great Consternation*, and walk'd up and down as one *amaz'd*.<sup>104</sup>

This is Thomas Trosse's chronicle of his own mental illness, but few Methodists theorized the Devil as an expression of purely psychological, rather than moral, disorder. As John Haime related in a similar account, Satan was in deadly earnest when he came to the bedroom:

I had no rest day or night. I was afraid to go to bed, lest the devil should fetch me away before morning. I was afraid to shut my eyes, lest I should awake in hell. I was terrified when asleep, sometimes dreaming that many devils were in the room, ready to take me away.<sup>105</sup>

101. Keimer is quoted in Harrison, *Second Coming*, 25.

102. Underwood is quoted in Hopkins, *A Woman*, 95.

103. Knox, *Enthusiasm*, 521.

104. Thomas Trosse, with italics dramatizing his hysteria; he is quoted in Alan Ingram, *The Madhouse of Language: Writing and Reading Madness in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 41.

105. WV 1:13.

For Southey, these nighttime lunacies proved that Methodists and medics had fatally mixed their metaphors. The “preachers,” like “empirics have but one drug” to excite their “religious terrors”: “the same powerful medicine which restores the confirmed sinner to health by searching his very bones till the joints open and the teeth are loosened, they administer in all cases, and in those who have weak nerves and warm imaginations, madness is frequently the result . . . [t]hat the increase of religious madness is occasioned by and commensurate with the increase of Methodism, is a fact which may be verified at Bedlam.”<sup>106</sup>

Frankenstein, like the most hopeless inmate of this enthusiastic asylum, is compelled to fits as soon as he sees his “devil”—“my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed”—and while he is gripped by hysterical convulsions throughout his narrative, these are most often prompted by the Creature or its handiwork (38). It is, as he says, “my abhorrence of this fiend” that produces the routine: “when I thought of him, I gnashed my teeth, my eyes became inflamed” (66). The fury climaxes in a religious mission, a sworn desire to “make a pilgrimage to the highest peak of the Andes, could I, when there, have precipitated him to their base” (66). It’s not long before Frankenstein quite literally calls for salvation in the throes of combat with the fiend, faithfully recreating in detail the “Wesleyan manifestation”: “‘Do not ask me,’ cried I, putting my hands before my eyes, for I thought I saw the dreaded spectre glide into the room; ‘*he* can tell.—Oh, save me! Save me!’ I imagined that the monster seized me; I struggled furiously, and fell down in a fit” (41).<sup>107</sup>

With each struggle, Frankenstein’s fury marks the character of his relationship with the Creature. The traditional form of engagement with the Devil was astonishingly vicious; Wesley granted that “enthusiasm” made its victims “daily more rooted and grounded in contempt of all mankind, in furious anger, in every unkind disposition, in every earthly and devilish temper.”<sup>108</sup> Southcott, who in addition to her prophecies wrote the psychomachia *A Dispute Between the Woman and the Powers of Darkness*, wished to conquer the Devil “with his mouth tied,” and to “[skin] his face with her nails,” and she dreamed “once she bit off his fingers, and thought the blood sweet.”<sup>109</sup> Southcott’s sanguinary vengeance was an arresting survival into the nineteenth century of the medieval belief that

106. Southey, “On the Evangelical Sects,” 499–500.

107. See Knox’s description of the parallel event in Methodist psychomachia; it is characterized by “people who cried as in the agonies of death, who were struck to the ground and lay there groaning, who were released . . . with a visible struggle then and there from the power of the devil” (*Enthusiasm*, 472).

108. John Wesley, “The Nature of Enthusiasm” [1746], in *Sermons* II, 58.

109. Southey, *Letters from England*, 441.

demonic curses were best treated by scratching the offending warlock,<sup>110</sup> and if most Methodists were now more invested in the blood of Christ than of Satan, their encounters still tended to leave a mark. In the story of one Methodist woman in 1812, the figure of Blakean pathos becomes an excuse for a bathetically lopsided brawl: “I dreamed one night, I had great wrestlings with Satan in the figure of a little black boy—the size of a child of two years old, I got my right hand in his mouth, and after some contest got my foot on his head, awoke.”<sup>111</sup> So too, Frankenstein: every time he encounters (or even thinks of) his “scoffing devil,” he blazes into raptures of violence. The Creature is no abject yet noble Satan, but a vulgar devil to be dealt with accordingly, and his sublime apostrophes in Chamonix are answered with a crude Manichean logic—“we are enemies; Begone, or let us try our strength in a fight, in which one must fall”—that itself quickly dissolves into a purer form of aggression: “my rage was without bounds; I sprang upon him” (72–73).

That such primitive violence should explode in a geography sanctified by a “high male romanticism” represents a deep and deliberate embarrassment of that tradition. Frankenstein’s soliloquy initially channels Percy Shelley, as he’s swept away “with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul,” reciting stanzas from “Mutability.” But Romantic enthusiasm gives way to its Southcottian other even on these most hallowed slopes, and this rhetorical fluency collapses into incoherent frenzy against the “Devil” (71–72). Again and again, Frankenstein attempts to compel his demon to combat, finding himself “possessed by a maddening rage when I thought of him, and desired and ardently prayed that I might have him within my grasp to wreak a great and signal revenge on his cursed head” (156).

But if Frankenstein craves to bruise this particular serpent’s head, it’s a script with which his “devil” refuses to participate, at least initially; every time he launches his body towards the Creature, “the devil eluded my grasp” (160). The Creature, though capable of violence, refrains with Frankenstein. His constant injunction is to language—“Listen to my tale . . . But hear me. . . Listen to me, Frankenstein”—even as the enthusiast is usually engorged by such fury that he is “beyond expression,” as “rage choaked my utterance” (74, 160). “Instead of threatening,” the Creature is “content to reason with [Frankenstein]” (111), begging for a rational dialogue between two civilized subjectivities. His conventionally enlightened “account of the progress of my intellect” (96) struggles

110. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 531.

111. Quoted in Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment*, 219.

to sop up the enthusiasm which soaks the surrounding Volumes, carefully desupernaturalizing monstrosity as a social artifact, rather than biological imperative or metaphysical inevitability: “My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal” (113).<sup>112</sup> In the Creature’s telling, the magical arrives only with plangent irony, in the “supernatural force” with which Felix “tore me from his father” (103) and exiles him from the order of the human. But the supremely literate Satanism which he assumes in reaction—“I, like the arch fiend, bore a hell within me” (104)—still protests socially and theologically against his positioning as the twisted Devil of Methodistical nightmare.

His appeals for audition and compassion are deliberately secular, even materialist in quality, swearing on astronomical bodies rather than the celestial spirits which might reside in them:

I swear to you, by the earth which I inhabit, and by you that made me, that, with the companion you bestow, I will quit the neighbourhood of man, and dwell, as it may chance, in the most savage places . . . I swear . . . by the sun, and by the blue sky of heaven, [1831: and by the fire of love that burns in my heart,] if you grant my prayer, while they exist you shall never behold me again. (113–14)

“Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind,” the Creature offers Frankenstein, in a bid of clever *realpolitik* that balances carrots against sticks: “If you will comply with my conditions, I will leave them and you at peace; but if you refuse, I will glut the maw of death” (72). Even in its threatened apocalypse, this is the political calculus of a reasonable agent attempting to bargain with its reasonable opposite: precisely what makes the arrangement so unacceptable to Frankenstein. Victor revolts against the ideological implications of this negotiation—namely that both he and his Creature are social rather than spiritual antagonists, engaged in political transaction rather than ontological aggression—even more than he resents its specific consequence in the female creature. Within a matter of paragraphs, he has recast an incipient

---

112. For some of the Enlightenment contexts of the creature’s autobiographical agenda, see Peter Brooks, “‘Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts’: Language, Nature, and Monstrosity,” in Levine and Knoepfelmacher, *Endurance of Frankenstein*, 205–20; Alan Richardson, “From *Emile* to *Frankenstein*: The Education of Monsters,” *European Romantic Review* 1.2 (1991): 147–62.

social contract into a pact with the Devil: “The promise I had made to the daemon weighed upon my mind” (115).

It will come to weigh on the Creature, as well, who is increasingly pinned underneath Victor’s devilish representations. “‘I expected this reception,’ said the daemon” (72), but expectation can’t manage reception. If the Creature’s introduction bows with a wearily heroic fatalism, the subsequent clause enacts his submission to the frame narratives which rewrite him as soon as he finishes speaking, shifting Byronic hauteur into demonic utterance. While the Creature “will keep no terms with my enemies” (73), the terms of his enemies keep him, constructing his discourse as irrevocably as Frankenstein fashioned his body, and his formidable physical prowess can’t reverse his radical helplessness before the cultural logics he inherits. He is a “Devil” in all its senses for the Romantic period: the faded remnant of the Miltonic counter-spirit, the vulgar Adversary of vulgar Man, and most especially, the “Printer’s Devil,” an alienated laborer fabricating someone else’s text.<sup>113</sup>

More than the mysterious ritual which raises the dead, the revelation on an Alpine glacier of the Creature’s fluency is the novel’s most astonishing turn. Yet it leaves little impression on its witness—even Eve, lost in catastrophic naïveté, was able to wonder of her Satan, “How cam’st thou speakable of mute” (*Paradise Lost* 9:563), a curiosity that Victor never shares as he berates his uniquely “wretched devil” (72). The Creature’s autobiography is moving, especially as it discovers that its story is not its own, and that his true account, already written though poignantly misrecognized and denied, has always been at hand in his own pocket:

You, doubtless, recollect these papers. Here they are . . . the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your own horrors, and rendered mine ineffaceable. (99)

This birth certificate can’t be emended, as Victor’s writing on the Creature is “ineffaceable.” The Creature is surrounded by cultural forms so absolute in their authority that they press themselves upon him with a naturalized inevitability, as, in a German forest, a “leathern portman-teau” casually sprouts like so many weeds the great works of English,

---

113. The *OED* gives this devil as “the errand-boy in a printing office. Sometimes the youngest apprentice is thus called.” “Devil, noun, 5a.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edition, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2010), February 9, 2011. <http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/51468>

German, and classical literature, conveniently accessible in French translation (96).

But Goethe, Milton, and Plutarch don't, I think, offer emancipatory models for Creaturely self-fashioning. They instead tease him with subject positions forever off-limits to an abomination trapped in a world where the cultural and the natural are indistinguishable. As Volney and the de Laceys teach (89–91), the Creature is different from difference itself, having no nation, no race, no class, and, without a female with whom to perform his sexual identity, a problematic gender. There's only one script, one set of oppositions, which will admit him and make sense of him, and as the novel progresses, he plays his part with some aplomb:

“Man, you shall repent of the injuries you inflict.”

“Devil, cease; and do not poison the air with these sounds of malice.”

(131)

*Man, Devil*: this battle between moral personae is deeply amenable to Victor, but by the end, even the Creature is invested in his role. As Frankenstein pursues his “Scoffing devil,” the demon promises a struggle which takes as its type the travails of both Jacob and Job: “Come on, my enemy; we have yet to wrestle for our lives; but many hard and miserable hours you must endure, until that period shall arrive” (162).

The Creature loses himself completely in this drama, and as he confides to Walton, frame narratives frame him criminally and demonically: “I was the slave, not the master of an impulse, which I detested, yet could not disobey” (176). Along with his creator's enthusiastic agenda, the Creature seems to have absorbed his abiding habit for foisting responsibility onto irresistible forces—but if this is a convenient excuse, even the Creature's enemies recognize his genuine submission to discursive structures that aren't his own. The voice of the Devil speaks with none of the rhetorical self-possession of Milton's Tempter, but as a strangled voice of opposition to another's heroics. After the destruction of the female, the Creature croaks to Victor “in a smothered voice” (130), a condition that has only grown more acute when Walton observes that “[h]is voice seemed suffocated” (175). “The completion of my demoniacal design became an insatiable passion,” he sighs at the end (176), sadly signaling, in the distance between “demoniacal” and “demonic,” that he is the designed, not designer, his adjective identifying with the Demoniac rather than the Devil, the helpless body puppeted by spiritual possession, not the agent of evil

itself. Absent an exorcism, the Creature is a figure of devilish abuse as much as devilish abuser—and yet, even in this pathetic complication, the Creature inadvertently advances the novel’s enthusiastic argument, as the Devil of enthusiasm is more sinned against than sinning.

Southcott’s devil is perpetually vanquished, a moral conquest enacted physically: “but at last she got up in a rage against the Devil, and said her revenge would be sweet to see the Devil chained down, and she should like, with a sharp sword, to cut him to pieces.”<sup>114</sup> But also intellectually: Southcott continually wins rhetorical victories over her antagonist, who haplessly exclaims, “Thou eternal bitch! Thou runnest on so fast the Devil cannot overtake thee . . . what room have I to speak if thy tongue runs on so fast?”<sup>115</sup>—a practice that Victor seems to echo when he “recovered only to overwhelm him with words expressive of furious detestation and contempt” (76). The very purpose of this Devil is to be bested, tortured, and tormented by the Christian warfarer. As Southcott’s Satan howls, “Thou temptest the Devil and not the Devil thee.”<sup>116</sup> His resistance is the foil to the psychomachiac’s dominance, and the brutality heaped upon him serves only as an index of the human combatant’s moral worth; Hunt was convinced that “pity is not the studied virtue of the Methodist Christians: their tragedy consists of simple terror.”<sup>117</sup> The enthusiast is thus doctrinally excused from remorse, and unapologetic oppression cues rejoicing: “I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now, I was always conqueror.”<sup>118</sup>

In the end, Frankenstein’s conquest is as complete as Wesley’s, as his Creature parrots a “sad and solemn enthusiasm” by way of valediction (179), while Victor indulges himself in a self-reckoning which issues as a series of exculpatory reimaginings: “I felt as if I had committed some great crime, the consciousness of which haunted me”; then “I was guiltless,” and finally, “During these last days I have been occupied in examining my past conduct: nor do I find it blameable” (126, 173). This is the final exploitation of the already much abused Creature: Frankenstein’s transition from voluble guilt to serenely detached innocence ironically marries the transcendentalizing displacements of a broadly “romantic ideology”

---

114. Southcott is paraphrased in Southey, *Letters from England*, 444.

115. Southcott, *A Dispute*, 25–29.

116. Southcott, *A Dispute*, 13.

117. Hunt, *An Attempt*, Essay V: “On the Melancholy and Bigotry of the Methodists, Concluded,” *Examiner* 29 (July 17, 1808): 461.

118. Wesley, *Journal and Diaries I*, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, 447.

with enthusiastic self-study, which in Methodist accounting inevitably culminated in the doctrine and delusion of “Assurance.” If all New Births, Wesleyan and Frankensteinian, demanded that one begin “as a lost, miserable, self-destroyed, self-condemned, undone, helpless sinner,”<sup>119</sup> as the enthusiast is “‘become as it were a monster unto many,’ that the zealous of almost every denomination cry out ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth,’”<sup>120</sup> the reward was the annihilation of responsibility and shame in the certainty of redemption:

How long I was in that agony I cannot tell; but as I looked up to heaven I saw the clouds open exceeding bright, and I saw Jesus hanging on the cross. At the same moment these words were applied to my heart, “Thy sins are forgiven thee.” My chains fell off; my heart was free. All guilt was gone, and my soul was filled with unutterable peace.<sup>121</sup>

As Hazlitt wrote, self-flagellation reliably gave way to self-congratulation, while confusing the boundaries between elevated and popular discourse:

The principle of Methodism is nearly allied to hypocrisy, and almost unavoidably slides into it. . . . The first Methodist on record was David. He was the first eminent person we read of, who made a regular compromise between religion and morality, between faith and good works. After any trifling peccadillo in point of conduct, as a murder, adultery, perjury, or the like, he ascended with his harp into some high tower of his palace; and having chaunted, in a solemn strain of poetical inspiration, the praises of piety and virtue, made his peace with heaven and his own conscience.<sup>122</sup>

Like Hazlitt’s Milton, his David blurs the lines of class that should parse the strains of enthusiasm: David is emblematic of an unequivocally vulgar religious sensibility, yet his mystification proceeds from the “solemn strains of poetical inspiration,” “chaunted” in the tower of class privilege.

Methodist displacement compromises its romantic corollary, and quest romance doubles as Frankenstein’s story of a “pilgrimage,” during which his pursuit of the fiend “continued with unabated fervor”—a pilgrimage that has spiritually sanctified Frankenstein, whose rhetoric gestures toward theological certainty as his “task enjoined by heaven” comes to its close

---

119. Wesley, “The Marks of the New Birth,” *Sermons* I, 419.

120. Wesley, *Journal and Diaries* I, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, 218.

121. WV 1:74–75.

122. Hazlitt, “On the Causes of Methodism,” 57.

(165, 162, 161).<sup>123</sup> Ever to the end, his problematic romanticism solicits the critical para-language of enthusiasm, and his concluding gasps, whispered in a cloudy region just beyond a place called, not without motivation, Archangel, serve to solemnize the tradition that has haunted his every step.

---

123. Cf. Boyd Hilton's sense that "only martyrdom, leading to 'assurance'—that is, consciousness of the power of the Holy spirit operating within oneself, independently of sanctification or good works—and so to 'final perseverance,' could suffice to vanquish the Devil," in *Age of Atonement*, 11.