Frankenstein's Science
Experimentation and Discovery in Romantic Culture, 1780–1830

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Chapter 3

The Professor and the Orang-Outang: Mary Shelley as a Child Reader

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It has frequently been pointed out that Mary Shelley's literary work was a most unusual creation for a young woman but a look at the intellectual background of her childhood explains that her early reading played a significant role in her unusual choice of subject. This chapter shows how her childhood reading entered into the composition of Frankenstein. Two articles in the early issues of the Juvenile Library, a children's encyclopaedia for which her father wrote pseudonymously, were particularly seminal. 'The Orang-Outang; or Wild Man of the Woods' (1800) is a cut-down chapter from Oliver Goldsmith's History of the Earth and Animated Nature (1774). It introduces young readers to the scientific investigation of primates — the Linnaean order embracing man and ape — but intermingles anecdotal stories about the as yet unidentified African gorilla with empiricist studies. The second article, 'Moral and Instructive Biography: Dr. Herman Boerhaave', is adapted from Dr William Burton's translation of an official eulogy of Boerhaave (1668–1738), the seventeenth-century Dutch chemist and physician who experimented with live animals, dabbled in magnetism and electricity, and pursued the secret of compounding mercury as a cure for syphilis.

In this chapter I argue that Mary Shelley's early reading laid the foundation for the sensational novel she wrote as an adolescent. Frankenstein, like Boerhaave, is an ambiguous figure who may be seen as a scientific genius or a dabbler in the uncanny. The creature is equally ambiguous: is he an orphaned soul, rejected and cursed for crimes he never intended to commit, or is he a 'cruel and lascivious ape' like Goldsmith's orang-outang? Detailed discussion of these ambiguities will shed light on the baffling complexity of Frankenstein.

The creative cooperation between Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley

In 1814, Mary Shelley, born under the name of Mary Godwin, the only child of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, eloped with her father's dazzling protegé, the married poet and heir to a baronetcy, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Reading
and writing were activities that logically belonged together for the couple, a fact which helps us disentangle the frequently disputed question concerning Percy’s participation in the authorship of *Frankenstein*. Growing out of an imaginative cooperation, it can be described as the outcome of an inspired attempt to be jointly creative, or in other words to blend writing desire with reading desire.

Shelley and Mary Godwin had grown attached to each other over reading experiences. He urged her to write in honour of her illustrious parentage, warning her by the name she shared with her dead mother: ‘Gentle and good and mild thou art’ he had declared before they ran off, in a lyric that threatens to kill himself if Mary should ‘stop to wear the mask of scorn’.1 Shelley’s fond nickname for Mary, ‘O you pretty Pecksie’, was taken from the good little robin in Mrs Sarah Trimmer’s improving tale.2 Mary obediently applied herself but as they took off in haste to the war-torn Continent, a portfolio of her juvenile writings was accidentally lost or trashed so she, perforce, began her adult writing life with a blank slate.

Mary set enormous store on the authorial name Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, signing a letter to Byron with an exultant flourish just after she and Shelley were married in December 1816. For seven years, until Shelley drowned, Mary wrote from inside this frail *nidas* of works on paper. For instance, she opened a notebook journal,3 tried for a while to enlist Shelley’s collaboration in composing it, failed, but kept lists of her avid reading and rereading of favourite books, and mined it for her fictions until she published her last book in 1844.4

During this thirty-year publishing career Mary Shelley articulated her fictional materials to the writing stance of an English girl coming ‘out’ in society, as in the subtitle of Fanny Burney’s debut novel in 1786, *Evelina; or A Young Lady’s Entrance into the World*. In 1818, when *Frankenstein* was published, this was a diplomatic choice for the 20-year-old daughter and wife of Jacobin radicals. A modest *occupatio* licenses a parvenu writer to practise.

In March 1817, Shelley lost a case in Chancery to secure custody of the two children of his first marriage. At this time, Mary had been writing *Frankenstein* almost every day for six months. In April, the desired collaboration with Shelley began in earnest, with his ‘intercalations’ in the margins of Mary’s two principal drafts. In May they joined forces to transcribe a fair copy of their story about a Miltonic couple, Adam and Eve driven out of Eden.

Even if they were to leave Europe & inhabit the deserts of the new world *it was their intention to have children* and a race of devils would be propagated on the earth from whose form and mind man shrank with horror.5 [my italics]

This is Malthus’s nightmare: procreation worldwide in the control of a racial underclass. Mid-sentence the narrator recoils as from ‘a race of devils … from whose form and mind man shrank with horror’, where the unstable resemblance of creature to master breaks down. Franco Moretti argues:

‘Europe’ is a last bastion for ‘man’ to save himself from alien forces. The monster … serves to dispel the agonisations and horrors evidenced *within society outside society itself* … [and to] reconstruct a universality, a social cohesion which in itself would no longer carry conviction.6 [original emphasis]

The published text of 1818 substituted a swelling period sentence from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s marginal annotations. The Demon Creature’s virile drive after higher and more complex being outgoes even Victor’s:

Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of these 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. (138)

This raises folklore horror to metaphysical terror and phallocises human evolution. The best and worst of the human species is his elemental ‘thirst’; the masculine gender is by no means coincidental. In 1817 Shelley touted the manuscript *Frankenstein* to London publishers as the work of ‘a friend in whom I feel a considerable interest’, excusing ‘such few instances of baldness of style as necessarily occur in the production of a very young writer’. But in letters to friends he spoke of it as ‘our book’.7 The publisher that finally accepted it, Lackington, Hughes & Co., added it to their list of titles that talked about magic, alchemy, magnetism, the cabala, alchemical philosophers, chemistry, and the occult.8 This located the character of Dr Victor Frankenstein among the English Paracelsians, and marketed *Frankenstein* in the border zone between modern medicine and ancient necromancy. The book’s dedication to Godwin implicitly acknowledges his political writings and, therefore, placed it in the tradition of radical oppositional publications, signalling that it might challenge the orthodoxies of Church and State. Shelley also wrote a buoyant preface in which he acknowledged a debt to the proto-evolutionist biology and unorthodox sexual theories of Dr Erasmus Darwin. In 1817, as they progressed in their work on *Frankenstein*, the Shelley couple were reading Darwin’s versified treatise, *The Temple of Nature*, with its astonishing illustrations by Henry Fuseli.9 This choice of reading matter further strengthened their oppositional outlook, illustrated by the fact that George Canning had Shackled Godwin’s name to Darwin’s in the Anti-Jacobin campaign of 1798.10

We might, then, read Mary Shelley’s daughterly writing stance as a recourse sign of the magnetic influence of controversial parental publications of the 1790s. Wollstonecraft’s feminist protest novel *The Wrongs of Woman*: or, *Maria* (1798), and Godwin’s *St Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799), a historical pastiche based on the sixteenth-century *chymique* Paracelsus, were both published at the height of the anti-Jacobin backlash against secular science and libertarian pedagogy.11 Mary Shelley inherited the writerly task of defending and vindicating her eighteen-century parentage. But her bent as a nineteenth-century author was
towards ressentimental variations on the polemics of the Enlightenment, vindication revised as self-exculpation.

Certain traits of Frankenstein are better understood if it is read in parallel with Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman*, the long-promised third *Vindication*, voiced not by the nominal heroine but by her gaoler, the madhouse wardress Jemima. Jemima herself is coarse and proletarian, a strong mother run to seed: ‘she had felt the crushing hand of power.’ Jemima’s incrimination of patriarchal power takes over the long Chapter 5 of *Wrongs of Woman*. The nadir of her ordeal is a self-induced late abortion: ‘I hurried back to my hole ... rage giving place to despair ... and swallowed [the potion], with a wish that it might destroy me, at the same time that it stopped the sensations of new-born life.’ Jemima’s self-vindicating monologue is the precursor of the Demon Creature’s sublime exostulation with his Maker on the Mont Blanc glacier, in *vol. 2 of the 1818 version of Frankenstein*. Twentieth-century feminist and Marxist critical appropriations of the creature of Frankenstein as a woman and/or a proletarian might better be understood as rhetorical recuperations of Jemima’s urgent voice.

The adolescent Mary Godwin read and reread Wollstonecraft’s books, invited by circumstances to identify herself with the nameless infant daughter to whom Maria addresses her postmortem denunciation of the woe that is in marriage. Interestingly enough, the chronology of *Frankenstein* resurrects and reanimates a ghostly 40-week gestation, the period from November 1796 to September 1797, the dates of Wollstonecraft’s conception of her pregnancy, birthing of Mary, and death.

Another key novel of Mary’s literary family was *St Leon* (1799), Godwin’s response to the attacks on Wollstonecraft’s and his own reputation. Beginning with *Caleb Williams* in 1794, Godwin’s novels constructed a plot of entrapment and abjuration, moving backwards from ending to beginning, and to the historical genesis of a spell or ruling obsession. With prosecutory zeal, Godwin stalks his hapless protagonist, Reginald St Leon, who is made to purge his fascination with ‘the philosopher’s stone’, ‘natural magic’ and ‘science’ and to disown the titles ‘advent’ and ‘chemist’. A similar situation describes the childhood and adolescence of Victor Frankenstein, who was exposed to the stories about the fifteenth-century Swiss Dr Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, called Paracelsus. He was legendary for his knowledge in spite of his supposedly godless hubris and failure to cure the humanist scholar Frobenius of a malignant syphilitic ulcer on his leg. The ‘empirick’ philosophers Paracelsus, Cornelius Agrippa and Albertus Magnus, are ‘lords of my imagination’ to the boy reader Victor, but the callow student Frankenstein finds them an encumbrance in the sophisticated halls of learning at Ingolstadt. The retrospective glance at a disowned knowledge characterises Victor’s maleducation.

And thus for a time I was occupied by exploded systems, mingling, like an unadept, a thousand contradictory theories, and floundering desperately in a very slough of

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multifarious knowledge, guided by an ardent imagination and childish reasoning, till an accident again changed the current of my ideas.' [my italics]

Despite his assertion of having moved on, Victor is still mired in contradictions, between the modern concept of electricity as a current, and the metaphysical idea of it as a dangerous fluid.

**William Godwin as literary entrepreneur**

At this stage it is valuable to revisit Mary’s childhood. In 1801 William Godwin remarried and found himself with four — soon to be five — children, whom he could not support financially by his ‘serious’ writing. He changed his publisher from the politically weighty brothers Robinson to the successful publisher of travel books and atlases, Richard Phillips, and turned his hand to authoring children’s books.

Godwin realised the advantage of illustrating text for children with visual images, maps and tables of facts. He sketched out a proposal for a ‘Universal Gazetteer and Geography for Young People’.

> It should describe the Quarters of the Globe. ... Speaking of Europe, for instance ... when I came to an Empire or Kingdom, I wd state its position, boundaries, climate &c. and name (merely, these) its principal cities, &c. The particular description of each City ... all this to be outlines, but clear & full as such. Philips has published a large Gazetteer (or some such thing) that wd serve as the ground work, if you dont mind plundering him, which I do not. Will you be so good as to tell me what you think of this?

This jolly pirate’s project of Godwin’s appears to have sunk without a trace. The encyclopaedia market was already crowded with such second-, third-, and fourth-hand redactions of texts and ‘clear & full outlines’ of plates whose original publication had been the signature work of distinguished writers, scientific artists, illustrators and famous explorers and voyagers.

And Godwin himself, like the majority of the English middle-class readership of travel books and voyages, never travelled further than Edinburgh. He next planned a children’s book about the adventures of young Tommy in the South Seas, but settled for translating *The Swiss Family Robinson* from the German of Johann Wyss. This came out in 1814, the year that saw three of the five adolescent children depart from the Godwin household. Wyss’s conservative book was a diplomatic choice for Godwin, still under suspicion as a Jacobin sympathiser. As William St Clair has shown, the children’s *Robinsonade* was seen to have been inspired by Rousseau’s *Emile: ou, de l'éducation* and became associated in the grim mind of Bowdlerism with left-wing politics and libertine sexual mores.

But Johan Wyss’s *Robinsonade* was different. Written for Christian family reading, it portrays a Swiss paterfamilias, his three obedient sons and a speechless wife and infant daughter. It was a translation, of course, and Godwin was bound to the text, but 1814 is a quizzical date to publish a book about children who are taken
grow more black, or tawny, as they advance in age. It should seem, consequently, that man is naturally white; since the same causes that darken the complexion of infants, may have originally operated, in slower degrees, in blackening whole nations.22 [my italics]

Another example that satisfies the contemporary thirst for information about remote parts of the world and, in particular, discusses the nature and possible reason for the existence of a large number of human varieties is taken from Buffon:

The most temperate climate is between the degrees of forty and fifty. There we behold the human form in its greatest perfection; and there we ought to form our ideas of the real and natural colour of man. Situated under this zone, the civilized countries are, Georgia, Circassia, the Ukraine, European Turkey, Hungary, South Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France, and the North of Spain: of all which the inhabitants are the most beautiful, and the most shapely, in the world. In all countries where the people fare wretchedly, they also look wretchedly, and are uglier and more deformed than their neighbours.23 [my italics]

To return to Godwin's attempts to secure financial success with natural historical topics, it is significant that Godwin's publisher Richard Phillips distributed a biannual children's encyclopaedia:

The Juvenile Library, including a complete Course of Instruction on every Useful Subject ... Particularly, Natural and Experimental Philosophy, Moral Philosophy. Natural History, Botany, Ancient and Modern History, Biography, Geography and the Manners and Customs of Nations, English Law, Penmanship, Mathematics, and Literary Belles Lettres. With Prize Productions of Young Students, and a Monthly Distribution of Prizes, value fifteen Guineas, and upwards.24

The formula was not new. In May 1788, The Juvenile Magazine: or an instructive and entertaining miscellany for youth of both sexes carried a letter from Oxfordshire: 'On the Pleasures and Advantages of Reading (Designed as an Allurement to Children)', which may have inspired Godwin. It argued that alluring a child to the reading habit roused its appetite for superior acquisitions and entitlements:

As soon as you can read with propriety and understanding, the greater part of the knowledge of mankind is within your power. How delightful must it be for a good boy to think, that his understanding will soon ripen by application and a desire to be informed! and that, whatever the researches of man have found out, and his ingenuity has invented and made public, may become his own! ... to make himself acquainted with the wonders and curiosities of nature and art; or to read of the actions of great men in history, it is all in his own power.25

Under the pseudonym of Theophilus Marcliffe, Godwin published The Looking-Glass: a true history of the early years of an artist.26 Its real-life protagonist was
the rising young professional artist William Mulready. Warming to the theme of self-improvement, the 1807 reissue was subtitled ‘Calculated to awaken the Emulation of Young Persons of both Sexes, in the Pursuit of every laudable Affinament’, and the epigraph proclaimed ‘Emulation has a thousand sons (Shakespeare)’, anticipating the moment when boys themselves would set out into the world in order to pursue education beyond the home. Throughout the tale, Godwin-Marcilfle steadily raises the bar for juvenile emulants. For instance, Mulready’s juvenile sketches are hailed as ‘specimens’ of ‘Genius’:

Each discovery ... afforded him [the 8-year-old Mulready] scarcely less delight, than Harvey experienced when he discovered the circulation of the blood; or Newton when he first detected and fixed the law of gravitation.

In 1807 M. J. Godwin & Co. took over The Juvenile Library and sold it from their Skinner Street shop, with prizes of ‘another book’ for winners of competitions. The ten-year-old Mary was a precocious writer, and Godwin ‘puffed’ her in the 1808 issue as the author of a set of comic verses, with illustrations by William Mulready, Godwin’s talented adoptee returning a favour.

Natural historical sources of ‘Frankenstein’

Three articles in the early issues of the Juvenile Library offer richly suggestive pretexts for Frankenstein. Volume I of the Juvenile Library (1800) carried an illustrated article headed ‘Manners and Customs of Nations’. This was a regular section of the magazine, and Volume I began with the northernmost tip of the western hemisphere, Greenland. Monochrome (or ‘penny plain’) steel-engraved prints showed scenes of the frozen north. ‘Boat of a Greenland Man’ shows a man padding a kayak across a fiord amid towering ice peaks. ‘The Greenlander’ shows a stubby man swaddled in animal skins. Both images were originally published as illustrations by Jacques De Sève to the voluminous works of Buffon’s Natural History and its juvenile sequels.

This first volume of the Juvenile Library started another regular series, ‘The Monthly Preceptor’. Somewhat surprisingly, the ‘precepts’, or admonitions, arise from an article ‘The Oorang-Outang; or Wild Man of the Woods’. This is a cut-down chapter from Oliver Goldsmith’s History of the Earth and Animated Nature (1774). It introduces young readers to the scientific investigation of primates, the Linnaean order embracing man and ape. But it carelessly muddles folklore about the as yet unidentified African gorilla with empirical observations of the anthropoid apes, and panders to contemporary prejudices about gender, social class and (non-English) ethnicity. The apes’ similarities to the human child were a source both of pity and terror, their similarities to savages (black Africans) a source of shame and revulsion. No child under instruction could find its way to resolving these ambivalences.

The Juvenile Library also contains some remarkable illustrations. The images of two apes are copied from two different originals, and altered for juvenile publication (see Figure 2). The original of Figure 1 was a female chimpanzee brought to England from Angola in 1738, and drawn by ‘Gravelot’, whose nameplate was inscribed on 27 November 1738 to Sir Hans Sloane, President of the Royal Society, and founder of the British Museum, where it is presently held. Gravelot drew the chimpanzee naked, with a protuberant belly and prominent pair of nipples, holding a tea cup in her left hand. The Juvenile Library’s image ‘Chimpanzee, 1’ covers belly and breasts with a missionary garment known familiarly as a Mother Hubbard. This sets a childlike animal before its child readers:

It walked upon its two hind feet, which it bent a little, like a dog that has been taught to dance. It made use of its hands and arms as we do. Its visage was not much more disagreeable than that of a Hottentot; but the body was all over covered with a woolly hair of different colours. As to the rest, it cried like a child ... its outward actions like the human ... its passions lively and significant ... It had also that expression of passion or joy which we often see in children, stamping with its feet, and striking them against the ground, to show its ight, or when refused anything it passionately longed for.

The teacup has been blotted out by the garment clutched around the modest ape, perhaps because it was too expensive to waste on children.

An image in Buffon’s Natural History, of what purports to be an orang-outang, but borrows features from the fabled Pongo (gorilla), was also reproduced (gratis) in Goldsmith’s History of the Earth, and is reproduced again in the Juvenile Library’s illustration ‘Oorang-Outang, 2’ [sic]. Its accompanying text describes the animal as follows:

But the Oorang Outangs seen and described by other travellers, are truly formidable; and in the gloomy forests, where they are only found, seem to hold undisputed dominion. Many of these (they tell us, though we must receive their accounts with some allowance) are as tall or taller than a man; active, strong and intrepid, cunning, lascivious and cruel.

... From this description of the orang outang, we perceive at what a distance the first animal of the brute creation is placed from the very lowest of the human species. Even in countries peopled with savages, this creature is considered as a beast. It is in vain that the orang outang resembles man in form, or imitates many of his actions; he still continues a wretched, helpless creature, pent up in the most gloomy part of the forest, and, with regard to the provision for his own happiness, inferior even to the elephant or beaver in sagacity.

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Goldsmith's 1774 text had followed up this description with a personal statement:

I have many reasons to believe that the most perfect of the kind [apes] are prone, like the rest of the quadruped creation, and only owe their erect attitude to human education ... Schouten, who mentions their education, tells us that they are taken in traps, and taught in the beginning to walk upon their hind legs.19

Schouten had also credited the false belief that apes rape human women ("they are passionately fond of women") but this is only hinted at obliquely in the Juvenile Library's vetted account, where they are said to be "tall or taller than a man; active, strong and intrepid, cunning, lascivious and cruel".

Volume 6 of The Juvenile Encyclopaedia (1803) carried 'Moral and Instructive Biography XXX: Dr Herman Boerhaave'. This article is prised from Dr William Burton's English translation of an official eulogy of the seventeenth-century chemist and physician Boerhaave, by the French royal academician Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle.20 Boerhaave is eulogised as an eminent professor, devoted medical practitioner, illustrious man of science: Slim dark shadows cover his experiments with live animals; his dabbling in attraction (magnetism and electricity) is described, as is his futile search for the secret of compounding mercury as a cure for syphilis. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, British science publications concentrated on the professional practice of medicine, and social control of diseases and their cure.

Oliver Goldsmith himself had studied under Boerhaave at Leyden, the twin university to Edinburgh's famous medical school. And William Godwin, who retained admiration for Goldsmith from his own childhood reading experiences, adopted Boerhaave ('the Homer of the whole Dutch nation') as a figurehead of ambition achieved. The Juvenile Encyclopaedia calls from Burton's translation passages that emphasise Boerhaave's exemplary childhood and devotion to learning and virtue. But the less salubrious aspects of seventeenth-century medical practice may be gleaned here and there.

The thirst for information paying off in cultural capital was stoked nowhere more expertly than in Philadelphia, capital city of the USA until 1801, and free of transatlantic copyright restrictions. The encyclopaedia format offered anonymous authorship and the shelter of a collective compendium to the embattled scientist Dr William Lawrence, whose masterly lectures in comparative anatomy and physiology had been performe withdrawn from sale in London in 1821 following attacks in the Tory press. Between 1805 and 1825, a Philadelphia publisher reissued Rees's Cyclopaedia in its entirety.41 Containing Lawrence's work, it brought an American readership to his articles: 'Cranium', 'Generation', 'Man' and 'Monster' offer a suggestive index of Victor Frankenstein's scientific interests. The Cyclopaedia's updated Addenda, issued after 1820, also included the article 'Venereal' and, hence, placed Herman Boerhaave at the head of modern venereology.
Frankenstein’s avid reading supplied him with the sum of physiological knowledge available to his period. As his scientific knowledge was conjoined with a lively speculative imagination, he is given the ability to form a new man. But on the eve of consummating his own creation, Victor Frankenstein suffers a pang of fright at his own temerity:

A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transient desire to disturb his tranquillity. ... If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and destroy your taste for ... simple pleasure ... then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. ... If no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquillity of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed. (37–38)

Much of this is conduct book commonplace, but ‘America would have been discovered more gradually’, if nonsense is taken literally to mean ‘by timed degrees’. Rather, it tropes a crossing to an absolute difference in kind, clutching at ‘gradation and transitions’ as the barrier between human and beast, natural and supernatural. But Victor is the pupil of an Anglo-Protestant ethos, conditioned to surmount barriers and bear down opposition to his will, however ‘incessantly baffled’, and no matter how ‘arduous an undertaking’. One ‘astonishing’ page-long paragraph winds him up to a peak of power: ‘My imagination was too much exalted by my first success to permit me to doubt of my ability to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man’. And then, without his appearing to notice it, tips him over the edge: ‘As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed, I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature’ (35). A rhetorical analepsis, misreading ‘minuteness of the parts’ for ‘minute transitions’, mistaking the tiny impediment for a trivial blockage, damns him. Victor’s impetuosity, a trait shared with the historical Percy Bysshe Shelley, speeds him to destruction. The Juvenile Library had spelled it out when Mary Godwin was a small girl in her father’s book-lined study:

The gradations of Nature in the other parts of nature are minute and insensible; in the passage from quadrupeds to fishes we can scarce tell where the quadruped ends and the fish begins; in the descent from beasts to insects we can hardly distinguish the steps of the progression; but in the ascent from brutes to man, the line is strongly drawn, well marked, and impassable.42

As her notebook demonstrates, Mary Shelley was intrigued by the debate ‘On the Amelioration of the Condition of the Slave Population of the West Indies’ in the House of Commons on 16 March 1824. George Canning, now a leading M.P., referred to Frankenstein in a speech that urged caution and gradualism in improving conditions for Black African slaves in the West Indies:

In dealing with the negro, Sir, we must remember that we are dealing with a being possessing the form and strength of a man, but the intellect only of a child. To turn him loose in the manhood of his physical strength, in the maturity of his physical passions, but in the infancy of his un instructed reason, would be to raise up a creature resembling the splendid fiction of a recent romance; the hero of which constructs a human form, with all the corporeal capabilities of man, and with the thaws and sinews of a giant; but being unable to impart to the work of his hands a perception of right and wrong, he finds too late he has only created a mortal power of doing mischief, and himself recoils from the monster which he has made.54

Mary Shelley took the reference for a compliment, ‘sufficiently pleasing to me’, ‘in honourable terms’, from the British establishment.44 The black African man was portrayed as a giant in body with the intellect of a child who must never be turned loose nor raised up. Metonymies of the cage and trap, and of the captive ape artificially induced to stand erect, inevitably recall the nameless gorilla who appears to have contributed to Mary Shelley’s conception of a new kind of man.

Six years after their debut, Victor Frankenstein’s pursuit of his Creature over a global Map of Fear had become a byword for godless science. In 1831 Mary Shelley’s introduction to the revised edition of Frankenstein for the first time spoke of herself as its author: ‘I, then a young girl [who] came to dilate upon so very hideous an idea’, and repeated the gesture of exporting the hideous progeny of her imagination.35 The image of a prepubertal girl bemused by false instructors is initially crystallised in John Tenniel’s 1865 illustrations to Lewis Carroll’s Alices in Wonderland. The following year, the magazine Punch ran the first of two full-page cartoons by Tenniel on the Frankenstein theme. Tenniel showed the creature of Frankenstein as a hugely muscled labouring man in a poacher’s black mask, a Brummagem proletarian in 1866, a Fenian incendiary in 1882. In both cartoons a small ‘Victor’ crouched whimpering in a corner has the face of a contemporary radical politician.46 Punch’s picture journalism instaurates the moral allegory of English beauty and foreign bestiality at the centre of public opinion and completes the circle from children’s picture book to satiric caricature.

Notes


4 Mary Godwin was reading Godwin’s Political Justice (1793) and Caleb Williams (1794), and Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), in October 1814 Journals of
Mary Shelley 1995: 29–37. A parody of St Leon by Edward du Bois was pronounced ‘indefably stupid’ on Thursday 6 October 1814 (Journals of Mary Shelley 1995: 31 and n. 5).


13 Wollstonecraft, The Wrongs of Women, p. 112.


15 Godwin, St Leon, pp. 208–9, 210, 214.


19 Abinger Papers deposited at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, Dep. c.607/2, single-page, unsigned draft letter to unidentified addressee, on laid paper watermarked 1802.


29 This was Mounseer Nongtongpa; or, the discoveries of John Bull in a trip to Paris.


32 The African gorilla was first correctly described by the Rev. Mr Thomas Staunton Savage and Dr Jeffrys Wynan in A Description of the Characters and Habits of Trogloidytes Gorilla (Boston: Boston Society of Natural History, 1847). Information was slowly disseminated to the general reader by omnibus collections such as Chambers’s Encyclopaedia: a dictionary of universal knowledge for the people. Illustrated with maps and numerous wood engravings, 10 vols. (London and Edinburgh: W. and R. Chambers, 1850–68). The entry on ‘Gorilla’ was published in vol. 5 (1863), p. 1153.


34 ‘Gravelot’ (Hubert François Bourguignon d’Anville) (1699–1773), a French artist domiciled in England.


36 Georges Le Clerc, comte de Buffon, Histoire naturelle, was published in 44 quarto volumes, from 1749–1804, the last few volumes posthumously. An English translation, Buffon’s System of Natural History Abridged, 4 vols (Alnwick: W. Davison, 1814), related tales of humanoid apes like those in Goldsmith, mingling folk story and quasi-scientific travel books. Vol. 2, chapter 21 treats monkeys and apes.


42 The Juvenile Library, 1800: ‘The ourang outang; or, wild man of the woods’, p. 15.
Chapter 4

Geographic Boundaries and Inner Space: *Frankenstein*, Scientific Explorations and the Quest for the Absolute

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The experience of space is crucial for Romantic approaches to the understanding of human nature. It does not surprise, therefore, that space plays a significant role in *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley’s experimental portrayal of humankind. *Frankenstein* is deeply preoccupied with the boundaries of that which makes us human, in the biological and moral senses of the term. The scene of its action is consequently spread out over vast spatial expanses, which provide the literal setting for the characters’ experience of boundary crossing. Sometimes this involves a frightful disregard for ethical standards and sometimes it is an act of shaking off the shackles of social convention and order. For the main part, spatial expansiveness signals a preoccupation with ‘inner space’, a symbolic notion that is motivated not simply by a quasi-medical attempt to make an inventory of mental and psychological processes but an attempt to shed light on the imagination. A materialist might describe the imagination as a cognitive apparatus, Romantic philosophy assigned a far greater purpose to it, recognising it as a faculty or capacity resulting from the merger of psychological and physiological functions. Importantly, its perceptive faculty enabled the intuition of that which was beyond the power of sensory perception: the absolute.

The attempt to map inner geography was a new approach to the understanding of human nature. It modelled itself on the real experience of the world’s geography made available by contemporary journeys of exploration. For Romantic attempts to grasp the nature of perception and intuition, geographic space is used frequently as a metaphor but, almost without fail, a metaphor that indicates vast distances, particularly from one’s point of origin. If we keep in mind that the blank spaces on the world map were progressively being filled in, the insistent parallel between geographic and imaginary space suggests that enormous advances might also be made in the attempt to grasp the nature of the imagination. Mary Shelley’s bold strides through geographic space suggest that much insight can yet be gained by the attempt to map inner geography.