

Introduction

Unless I had been animated by an almost supernatural enthusiasm, my application to this study would have been irksome, and almost intolerable.¹

I

Surprisingly, perhaps, given the mythic status he now enjoys as the archetype of the modern scientist, the protagonist of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) has an approach to science that is decidedly anti-modern. In the early part of his confessional narrative Victor describes how his project to re-animate the dead was initially inspired by the study of writers such as Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus, a group of mystics and alchemists considered by his tutor the 'progressive' Professor Krempe to be 'as musty as they are ancient'. For Frankenstein, however, they display a holism that is noticeably lacking in the disciples of modern natural philosophy:

It was very different, when the masters of the science sought immortality and power; such views, although futile, were grand: but now the scene was changed. The ambition of the inquirer seemed to limit itself to the annihilation of those visions on which my interest in science was chiefly founded. I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth. (27)

Even after having been persuaded of the value of modern experimental techniques by the sympathetic Mr Waldman, Victor does not abandon his pursuit of the ancient ideal. Instead he chooses to put the former in the service of the latter, employing the latest analytical methods for his own overwhelmingly animistic ends, attempting to discover the vital unity that binds together the world of matter by synthesising a living human being from a collection of dead and disparate body parts. When seen in this light, Frankenstein's 'almost supernatural enthusiasm' – the quasi religious fervour with which he approaches his

I

Cambridge University Press

0521641004 - Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism

Gregory Dart

Excerpt

[More information](#)

research – can only serve to reinforce the impression that he is an intellectual ‘primitivist’ rather than a ‘progressive’.

Since its first appearance in 1818, Mary Shelley’s famous tale of over-reaching idealism has often been read as a political allegory of the French Revolution. In this interpretation of things, Victor Frankenstein is seen as a revolutionary idealist whose attempt to create ‘a new man’ reproduces the utopian impulse of 1789, and whose subsequent disappointment mirrors its historical failure. Not only the broad contour of the narrative, but also many of its incidental details serve to encourage this line of reasoning. Frankenstein is born in Geneva like that other ‘modern Prometheus’ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a figure widely recognised in the early nineteenth century as one of the intellectual fathers of French republicanism.² And he gives life to his creature at Ingolstadt in Bavaria, which became notorious in the counter-revolutionary historiography of the period as the birthplace of the secret society of the Illuminati, the alleged founders of revolutionary Jacobinism.³ Despite this, however, while demonstrating a full awareness of the symbolic geography of the novel, most ‘political’ readings of Frankenstein have not made much of its European setting, preferring to regard the novel in rather narrowly English terms, either as a specific attack on the utopian idealism of Shelley’s father William Godwin, or more generally as ‘a critique of the revolutionary optimism of the 1790s’.⁴

This is unfortunate, especially as there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that recent European history is likely to have been very much in Mary Shelley’s mind when she came to write *Frankenstein*. Significantly, the letters and diaries of the Shelley circle for the Swiss summer of 1816 indicate that both Mary and Percy were eagerly devouring the novels and memoirs of Rousseau around this time, while the latter was dipping liberally into Lacretelle’s *Précis Historique de la Révolution Française*.⁵ So much so, indeed, that it is tempting to think that, with the fall of Napoleon the previous year, and the bringing to a close of more than twenty years of European conflict, both Mary and Percy had been moved to undertake a reassessment of the long history of the French Revolution, and of the specific influence of Rousseau upon it.⁶ And all the signs are that, for Percy at least, this reappraisal led to a fundamental revision in his attitude to the ‘citizen of Geneva’. Where previously he had considered Rousseau to be in the mainstream of French rationalist thought, from this time onwards he began to make a distinction between Rousseau and the more sceptical tradition of the Enlightenment, contrasting the ‘cold and unimpassioned spirit of Gibbon’, with ‘the greater

Cambridge University Press

0521641004 - Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism

Gregory Dart

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

and more sacred name of Rousseau', increasingly coming to regard the latter as 'the greatest man the world [had] produced since Milton', and his celebrated novel *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, which he was then re-reading, as 'an overflowing . . . of sublime genius, and more than human sensibility'.⁷

Evidently, what excited Shelley most about Rousseau's writing was his famously impassioned style, which in the minds of many readers of *Julie* was a fully Promethean force, transcending the bounds of eighteenth-century sentimental narrative, breaking down the conventional barriers existing between writer and reader, to function as an overpoweringly direct and unmediated conduit of libertarian sentiment. It was this 'enthousiasme' which Germaine de Staël had offered as a model for the people of France in her *Lettres sur les écrits et le caractère de J. J. Rousseau* of 1788, published amid the first stirrings of the revolutionary ferment, and it was this selfsame quality that she was still recommending just over ten years later, in her epoch-making treatise *De la littérature* (1800), this time as a healthy alternative to the destructive fanaticism which had swept the First Republic during the Terror. In her eyes the fact that the Jacobins had adopted Rousseau as their patron saint did not justify the widespread neglect his writings had fallen into on both sides of the channel after the fall of Robespierre. There was much in Jean-Jacques that was of enduring value, and clearly distinct from the cold, calculating spirit of the Terror.⁸ A highly sympathetic reader of de Staël, who was deeply indebted to her post-revolutionary cultural theory, Shelley himself seems to have concurred with this view, for in the years after 1816, he repeatedly strove to redeem Rousseau from the tarnishing influence of the French Revolution, increasingly interested in the artistic potential of 'enthusiasm' as an instrument of philosophical and political education.

In this context, it is clearly relevant to our reading of *Frankenstein* as an allegory of the French Revolution that the central revolutionary hero of Mary Shelley's novel, for all his deft employment of the sophisticated techniques of modern science, is fundamentally a Rousseauvian 'enthusiast' rather than a sceptical *philosophe*. Most recent accounts of the intellectual character of the French Revolution have tended to reproduce the English counter-revolutionary polemic of the period, which represented it purely in terms of a commitment to the systematic materialism of the French Enlightenment.⁹ But Mary Shelley's rather more nuanced allegory exposes the inadequacy of this over-simplified model, inviting us to reassess the complex history of revolutionary Jacobinism. It recalls the fact that its leading mentor had been as profoundly opposed to the

Cambridge University Press

0521641004 - Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism

Gregory Dart

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism

iniquitous tendencies of modern commerce–capitalism and its cosmopolitan project of ‘enlightenment’ as he had been critical of the old and corrupt aristocratic order of eighteenth-century France. For as we shall see, Rousseau’s highly democratic inflection of neo-Spartan civic humanism was simultaneously both revolutionary and anti-progressive, so that for all the rather abstract nature of his political theory, he was in many ways as much of a defender of custom and tradition as the English conservative Edmund Burke. His intellectual legacy to the French Revolution was thus profoundly at odds with that supplied by the central philosophical tradition of the French Enlightenment, which was far more enthusiastically ‘modern’ in nature. And the contradictions inherent in this joint heritage were to contribute greatly to the deep ambivalence of revolutionary republicanism, for as Allan Bloom has recently remarked, ‘there were many opponents of Enlightenment and its political project – in the name of tradition or the ancestral, in the name of the kings and the nobles, even in the name of the ancient city and its virtue. But Rousseau was the first to make a schism within the party of what we may call the left’.¹⁰

Few critics of *Frankenstein* have been willing to acknowledge or discuss the different ideological formations that went into the construction of revolutionary politics. Here as in Romantic studies as a whole, the Revolution has too often been seen in remarkably monolithic terms, as a systematic and progressive experiment in government that eventually resulted in bloodshed and terror. It is the central argument of this introduction, and indeed of the book as a whole, that this unacceptably simplistic interpretation – a deliberate fabrication by the great architects of the English counter-revolution, Burke and Coleridge – has seriously hampered our understanding of the literature of the period. It is my contention that one cannot hope to fathom the truly paradoxical nature of some of the central texts of English Romanticism without reference to the tensions and contradictions of French republicanism, a movement that contained both systematically ‘progressive’ and radically ‘primitivist’ elements.

In chapter one of *Frankenstein* Shelley describes how Waldman succeeds in removing Frankenstein’s prejudice against modern science by showing him the kinds of things that the new chemists have accomplished: ‘these philosophers’, he affirms, ‘whose hands seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pore over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding-places’ (27–8). Admiring

Cambridge University Press

0521641004 - Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism

Gregory Dart

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

Frankenstein's holistic zeal, Waldman suggests that it might be possible for him to make use of the latest innovations in science without degenerating into what he calls a 'petty experimentalist' (28). As in the French Revolution itself, so too in Mary Shelley's novel, the visionary project to create 'a new man' is the product of a collaboration between the primitive aspiration towards unity and simplicity and the analytic method pioneered by the Western Enlightenment. In this way *Frankenstein* describes a dangerous 'chemical reaction' between the ancient and the modern. Extending the revolutionary analogy, Frankenstein's construction of the creature can be seen as a metaphor for the politicisation of the Parisian *sans-culottes* by the revolutionary bourgeoisie. Both processes can be seen as the bringing-into-being of a new kind of subjectivity, the bestowal of legitimacy and agency upon a new class of people. In each case, however, the creator abandons his creation: historically, the property restrictions to citizenship contained in the French Constitution of 1791 constituted a covert denial of the political demands of the urban working-class by the liberal bourgeois Assembly, and thus a clear betrayal of the latter's former commitment to the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.¹¹ And this historical betrayal was to find its literary counterpart in Mary Shelley's novel, where Frankenstein responds to the burgeoning subjectivity of the creature by fleeing from his presence.¹² In this way *Frankenstein* offers a telling vision of the displaced social tension at the heart of Romantic Manichaeism, for when the creature comes in search of his creator in the latter half of the book, and commits a series of horrific crimes in order to gain his recognition, Victor's response is simply to turn him into a monstrous counter-version of himself, which is just another way of denying him subjectivity: 'I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind [. . .] nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me' (49). Moreover, it could be argued that it is precisely this capacity for egotistical projection that identifies Victor Frankenstein as a belated adherent of revolutionary Jacobinism, since (as we shall see in the next chapter) it so neatly mimics Robespierre's historical displacement of revolutionary class tension between the *sans-culottes* and the political bourgeoisie onto the metaphysical monster of 'counter-revolution'.

As is well known, of course, in the second volume of *Frankenstein* this strategy of revolutionary displacement and denial is subjected to a powerful critique, as Mary Shelley breaks with all the literary traditions regarding the representation of revolutionary monstrosity by giving her

Cambridge University Press

0521641004 - Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism

Gregory Dart

Excerpt

[More information](#)

creature a voice.¹³ Having tracked Frankenstein down, and forced him to sit and listen to his life history, the monster begins to recount his solitary wanderings through the hinterlands of Germany. He recalls seeking shelter near to the cottage of the De Laceys, and of listening to the conversation of the various members of the family. Gradually, he begins to learn French (significantly, the very language of revolution, in the context of this period), and before long has taught himself to read, by poring over certain books that fall fortuitously into his hands. And crucially, the little library that he develops offers a kind of introduction to the history of European republicanism: Plutarch's *Lives*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* and Volney's *Ruins of Empires*. This means that when the creature finally launches a critique of his creator's revolutionary practice it is itself revolutionary – and republican – in origin. As he suggests to Frankenstein, it was not his creator's principles that were at fault, but his failure to see them in private as well as public terms: 'Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what hope can I gather from your fellow-creatures, who owe me nothing? they spurn and hate me'. But this does not prevent the creature from finally offering Frankenstein up to Walton and the reader at the end of the book as a kind of hero, a 'glorious spirit' (152) whose unfortunate failure was at least partly the fault of his recalcitrant and vengeful offspring. And Victor's last words do nothing to dispel the feeling of ambivalence that haunts the final pages of the novel, for in a dangerous supplement to his final confession he briefly suggests that some future enthusiast might actually be able to succeed where he has failed: 'Seek happiness in tranquillity, and avoid ambition', he tells Walton, 'even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed' (152).

Most critics have sought to align Mary Shelley with the former part of this statement rather than with the latter. Despite Percy Shelley's comment, in the Preface to the first edition, that the novel was not intended to 'prejudice any philosophical doctrine of whatever kind', there has been a strong temptation to read it as a repudiation of the radical politics of the revolutionary decade. In an essay from the late 1970s that still has considerable critical currency, Lee Sterrenburg was to read Frankenstein in terms of a retreat not merely from Jacobin principles, but from the discourse of politics as a whole, an appropriation of sites of historical importance – such as Geneva and Ingolstadt – into a

narrative of purely private significance. Developing his thesis, Sterrenburg interpreted the confessional structure of the novel as an internalisation of the political debate on the nature and influence of the French Revolution, an attempt to 'translate politics into psychology'. According to this view of things, Mary Shelley's aim was to domesticate the revolutionary narrative, to transform it from a debate on the nature of public man into a vindication of the private affections, and, in so doing, to register an implicit critique of the radical principles of her parents, and even perhaps of those of her husband. Sterrenburg's interpretation offers Frankenstein's radical internalisation of revolutionary history as a form of Romantic denial, an overdetermined negation of the legacy of French Jacobinism that is fundamentally conservative in nature.¹⁴ In many ways, this reading forms part of an extensive critical tradition of the last twenty years which has been tempted to see many of the central texts of Romantic literature as just so many displacements and denials of history.¹⁵ According to this view of things the strategy of displacement was a means by which writers living in a disturbing age could seek to transcend the problems of social and historical reality and then subsequently re-occupy them at the level of consciousness. 'In the case of Romantic poems', as Jerome J. McGann argues, 'we shall find that the works tend to develop different sorts of artistic means with which to occlude and disguise their own involvement in a certain nexus of historical relations'.¹⁶ In this introduction, and in this book as a whole, I would like to challenge the assumption, which is common to much contemporary criticism, that Romantic displacement tends to be either explicitly reactionary in nature or else a conservative retreat from the realm of politics, for in the case of a novel such as Frankenstein an examination of the revolutionary subtext forces us to rethink the political meaning of the text.

In his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme* of 1798 the French émigré priest Antoine-Joseph Barruel gave an hysterically vivid account of an occult conspiracy against the institutions of royalty, religion and the law which was spreading its baleful influence all over Europe. This movement, which Barruel called Jacobinism, was seen to have originated in the secret sect of the Illuminati founded by Professor Adam Weishaupt in Ingolstadt in 1776, a society substantially composed of philosophers and freethinkers holding fiercely deistic and republican beliefs. And from these small beginnings it was deemed to have quickly and smoothly expanded its underground influence, spreading its network into England and France as well as Germany, until it emerged

Cambridge University Press

0521641004 - Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism

Gregory Dart

Excerpt

[More information](#)

from the shadows during the crisis of 1789, to terrifying and destructive effect. For reasons that must have been to a large extent playful and ironic, Barruel's *Mémoires* was one of Percy Shelley's favourite books. Throughout his adult life, he was continually returning to it; he even made a point of reading Mary the section relating to the history of the Illuminati during the period of their courtship in 1814.¹⁷ Now, when seen in the light of the Shelleys' continued interest in a text such as the *Mémoires*, the comparative absence of politics from the discursive surface of *Frankenstein* might be seen to take on a different character. For it is likely that what they enjoyed most about Barruel was his representation of revolutionary 'enthusiasm' as a kind of parasitic influence, disseminating itself through a series of mysterious relays and transactions, a libertarian spirit that went beyond the traditional bounds of politics, operating as a kind of radical contagion. In *Frankenstein* both the creature and his creator possess the kind of passionate enthusiasm that affords them extraordinary powers of eloquence. Perhaps the most notable example of this is when Victor exhorts Walton's crew not to give up their heroic quest for the North Pole, where he assumes the role of a revolutionary statesman, a Danton or a Brissot: 'Did you not call this a glorious expedition? and wherefore was it glorious? Not because the way was smooth and placid as a southern sea but because it was full of dangers and terror; because, at every new incident your fortitude was to be called forth and your courage exhibited; because danger and death surrounded, and these dangers you were to brave and overcome' (149). Ultimately, of course, it must be admitted that Mary Shelley's novel does adopt an actively critical stance to the idealism of its central character. But while it may be true to say that the novel is finally very ambivalent about revolutionary enthusiasm, it is less certain that the work as a whole represents a denial of revolutionary politics, precisely because the repression of the political is so clearly part of its subject. For not merely does the early mention of Geneva and Ingolstadt suggest that Victor's story may have some degree of allegorical potential, it also highlights its curious, rather paradoxical status as a narrative that is at once pre- and post-revolutionary in nature, occupying the kind of political vacuum that was the shared experience of both Illuminists and post-revolutionaries alike. And this, in turn, may help to explain the finally rather indulgent attitude the novel adopts towards Frankenstein, its tendency to see his fundamentally secretive and solitary nature as the product of his adverse historical circumstances.

Rousseau's overdetermined absence from *Frankenstein* is significant

and important in this respect, not however because Mary Shelley was seeking to deny the political history of the revolution, but because she was seeking to recapture some of the revolutionary potential of his writings without having to undertake an explicit critique of their historical influence, preferring to let the allegorical narrative suggest one. And this is where the novel's emphasis upon first-person narrative is especially important, for as I hope to show, it can clearly be seen to draw upon a revolutionary tradition of confessional writing that had its roots in Rousseau.

In much of the best recent critical writing Romantic autobiography has often been seen in terms of a self-conscious desire to escape from politics and history.¹⁸ But in the autobiographical writings of Rousseau – his *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* and his *Confessions* – the cultivation of the language of isolation and self-martyrdom, the removal of the self from the hazards of historical circumstance possessed an explicitly political resonance. It was a form of polemical engagement masquerading as resignation and denial. By laying his soul bare in the *Confessions*, and openly exploring his former errors, Rousseau had effectively purified himself in print, using autobiography as a means of discovering that pure, primitive part of himself which remained resistant to the corrupting influences of modern life. Implicitly, he represented the autobiographical subject as an anticipation, in individual form, of the transparency and virtue which would be the defining feature of the ideal political community of the future, inviting his readers to break down the aristocratic obstacle to liberty and equality and enter the realm of transparency by engaging in a sympathetic reading of his work. And in works such as the *Dialogues* and the *Rêveries* he continued to develop a powerful confessional rhetoric in which the unmediated expression of personality became a powerful force for political change. Indeed as the profoundly unsympathetic counter-revolutionary polemicist Hannah More was forced to acknowledge, 'there never was a net of such exquisite art and inextricable workmanship, spread to entangle innocence and ensnare experience as the writings of Rousseau'.¹⁹ And when seen in this light, the autobiographical 'enthusiasm' of the *Confessions* can be seen as the perfect complement to the more obviously legislative mode of the same author's *Du Contrat Social*, simply an alternative means of pursuing the same republican ideal. In this way the 'citizen of Geneva' bequeathed a twofold legacy to the revolutionary generation: he offered a radically egalitarian version of the ancient political discourse of civic humanism, but he also developed a highly wrought rhetoric of confession that

Cambridge University Press

0521641004 - Rousseau, Robespierre and English Romanticism

Gregory Dart

Excerpt

[More information](#)

enlisted 'modern' sensibility for the republican cause. The question is, however, whether a detailed examination of this element of Rousseau's thought can modify our view of the intellectual and political roots of English Romanticism. During the next seven chapters I hope to show that a close analysis of the Rousseauvian influence upon revolutionary Jacobinism can shed new light on the confessional writings of William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Wordsworth and William Hazlitt, encouraging us to see them as works of transferred idealism rather than resignation and denial. For as I shall suggest, even in the aftermath of the failure of the Revolution, Rousseauvian confession continued to offer a radical consolation for the disappointments of practical politics, a version of the primitivist ideal that was at once deeply private and yet full of public resonance.

The framing of the central story of *Frankenstein* by the narrative of Robert Walton significantly affects our attitude to its central protagonist. Overpowered by Frankenstein's passionate openness towards him, and by the bewitching eloquence of his speech, Walton comes to regard him as a kind of persecuted philanthropist: 'if any one performs an act of kindness towards him', Walton tells his sister 'or does him any the most trifling service, his whole countenance is lighted up, as it were, with a beam of benevolence and sweetness that I never saw equalled. But he is generally melancholy and despairing; and sometimes he gnashes his teeth, as if impatient of the weight of woes that oppresses him' (14). The explorer's praise of the scientist is no less fulsome even after he has heard the full horrors of his story. Writing shortly after the latter's demise he admits not knowing what comment to make 'on the untimely extinction of this glorious spirit' (152). And nor is he the sole victim of this idolatry. At the end of the novel even the monster is finally driven to praise Frankenstein as 'the select specimen of all that is worthy of love and admiration among men' (155). This suggests that, contrary to the emphasis of most modern critical writing, the author's own attitude to Frankenstein was deeply divided. Undeniably, Mary Shelley offers a strenuous critique of Frankenstein's anti-social pursuit of self-fulfilment. Clearly we are to see his personal tragedy as a consequence of his neglect of the domestic affections; he himself suggests as much just before describing the birth of the monster (33). But the emphasis supplied by Walton and the creature does give credence to the implication of Frankenstein's last speech that his ideal was not unworthy, and that his mistake had been to seek it through modern methods; as if he should have seen that the project of revolutionary regeneration would be