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**Eighteenth-Century Medical Discourse and Sensible Bodies:
Sensibility and Selfhood in the Works of William Godwin,
Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Under the Supervision of
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Dedication

To my parents in Japan whose belief in this project gave me strength to persevere in this work, and also to my husband who has supported and encouraged me throughout the duration of my study.

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Abstract

In Eighteenth-Century Medical Discourse and Sensible Bodies: Sensibility and Selfhood in the Works of William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, I examine how medical, philosophical and theological discourses on sensibility and on selfhood mutually informed one another in the historical moment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England. The key to unraveling the complex notion of sensibility principally lies in the medical discourse that investigated the source of motion, knowledge, and moral feelings. I focus on the medical tracts which can be seen as discursive responses to Locke's epistemology. In addition, I read eighteenth-century philosophical texts and analysed some of the political debates on the French Revolution. The theory of associationism which is predicated on the study of nerves and sense-impressions throws some light on a particular aspect of sensibility which explores epistemological issues and character formation. I show how the nerve theory operated in gender specific ways, so exposing the gender bias of supposedly objective medical science. The specific writers I discuss, Godwin, Wollstonecraft and Shelley, all address the associationist theory directly. A close examination of their appropriation of medical language reveals that the image of the sensible body was a constant source of inspiration, and that their literary production was a continual process of re-figuring such a medicalised body. My project attempts to make sense of the equivocal position of Godwin and Wollstonecraft, who, while upholding rationalism, avow sensibility in their literary and non-literary works. The underlying contradictions between the

associationism and the authority of the individual's mind run deep. Rather than illustrating feminine reticence in Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a cultural reflection of a "proper lady," I argue that her characterisation of the monster and of female characters must be read as complex articulations of her sentiments about the discourses on sensibility and the problem of human agency.

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Introduction

This thesis was prompted by a feeling that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has not been fully discussed in the framework of the sensibility movement. The concept of sensibility has profound bearing upon the issues of selfhood and the rational mind, for sensibility, chiefly referring to the sensible body, addresses the epistemological and ontological questions regarding knowledge about one's identity formation. Considering that Shelley is the daughter of the rationalists William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, her epistemological confusion or her insecurity about herself has puzzled not only modern critics, but also the contemporary writers who knew her in person. She was often expected to be more "self-asserting" and "aggressive" than she really was. Robert Owen, a friend of Godwin, for example, was surprised to find her very different from his preconceptions.¹ Shelley's ambivalence about female self-assertion may be explained historically by the collision between what we call the "Romantic" model of originality and the "Victorian" model of feminine domesticity.² However, in this thesis, rather than trying to assess her status as a "proper lady," I would like to show that the ambivalence about herself can be approached by adopting a more encompassing "paradigm of sensibility"³ inscribed in the medical texts of the eighteenth and early nineteenth

¹ Betty T. Bennett, *Lives of The Great Romantics: Mary Shelley* vol.III (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999), p.127.

² Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelly and Jane Austen* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1984), p.116.

³ My use of this term "paradigm" draws upon G.S.Rousseau's application of Kuhn's category to be used as a method of research. Its condition is to be "sufficiently unprecedented," but at the same time open-ended so that the "practitioners" can be left with problems which they can resolve. See G.S.Rousseau, "Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility" in *Studies in the Eighteenth*

centuries.

The discussion of Shelley's sense of self will first and foremost require an extended reflection on how the "soul," the "rational mind" and the "female body" are represented in these medical treatises, for it was the development of medical sciences, the nerve theory in particular, that obscured the Cartesian dualism of body and mind. The word sensibility is significantly predicated upon Locke's theory of associationism elaborated in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). The "paradigmatic" sensibility, as G.S.Rousseau has argued, was inaugurated by Locke's sensationalist psychology. Not only were nerve (neurological) theorists engaged in the physiological investigation of somatic sensibility, but, like Locke, they addressed philosophical questions about the prime mover of the body.

The medical concept of the sympathetic interaction between organs was extended to symbolise the communication of feelings in a social context. The concepts of sensibility in medical and philosophical discourses therefore are not mutually exclusive. Sensibility is a polysemous concept, and by this term a wide range of ideas were evoked in different discourses and genres. Furthermore, bodily sensibility or "sensitivity" has implications that are contradictory to each other. Delicate nerves not only signified a moral capacity to sympathise with another, but also suggested the nerves' incapacity to withstand excessive passions. This dualistic performance of the senses preoccupied the minds of eighteenth-century physicians, intellectuals and philosophers.⁴ As John Mullan has dexterously shown in the last chapter of his *Sentiment and Sociability*, the cultural meaning of sensibility is torn between a morally

Century vol.III (Camberra: Australian National University Press, 1976).

⁴ G.S.Rousseau, "Science" in *The Context of English Literature: The Eighteenth Century* ed. Pat Rogers (London: Methuen, 1978), p.189.

privileged position and excessive or uncontrollable features.⁵ In my reading, I perceive the latter trait as historically representing a degradation to the status equivalent to non-human or animal being. This distinction occupies a pivotal place in my argument, for the monster in *Frankenstein* embodies the cultural implications of the excessive or the irrational. The medical discourse revolved round the question of the moral and intellectual capacity of the nerves. Besides David Hartley, I select several other medical authors who investigated the nature of nerves and how they are linked to moral issues.

The question of human agency was also brought forward through the discussion of matter and spirit. Materialist theory that explored the nature of the physical body was presented by many a medical expert, but for philosophical and literary authors it became an obstacle to forming rationalist views, or for theologians to justifying their immaterial system. In Chapter 1 I try to follow the development of these ideas in the medical writings of George Cheyne, Robert Whytt, David Hartley, William Cullen, John Brown, Erasmus Darwin, Julien Offray de La Mettrie, William Lawrence and Francois-Joseph Gall, and in the philosophical writings of David Hume and Thomas Reid.

The key to unraveling such complex and often convoluted ideas of sensibility in Shelley's *Frankenstein* lies in understanding not only the medical history or philosophical traditions, but also the legacy of her parents' philosophy. Although both Godwin and Wollstonecraft are more often than not associated with their rationalist philosophy, a closer examination reveals their ambivalence about the power of the mind. Their insistent rationalism hinges upon their belief in the power of the mind's rational

⁵ John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.16.

design against constantly accumulating bodily sensations. Yet they were both acquainted with the nerve theory whose imagery of the body questioned the ultimate source of knowledge. The most representative of all the medical tracts is David Hartley's *Observations on Man* (1749) which theorises the mechanism of the nerves that "vibrate" in response to "associations." Godwin's scepticism of such a mechanical theory is illustrated in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) which locates the source of self in the mind. In this associationist theory or what is generally called the theory of necessity, the mind is governed by laws of causation and hence one thought, action or event necessarily and logically leads to another. For Godwin, this does not mean that human beings are totally pre-programmed, and his goal was to resist and redirect the course of this theory so as to make the constant progress possible for the human race. However he explores human motivation and the cause of action only to find that they are ultimately inexplicable. Shelley inherits much of her epistemological problem from Godwin, who, while upholding rationalism, is confounded by the apparent contradiction in his theory of necessity. The characterisation of a man of feeling in *Caleb Williams* illustrates the difficulty in dividing the ideas of perception and reason, and in explicating complex human motivation. In Chapter 2 I explore Godwin's sentimentalism and show some of the rhetorical obstacles that he faced in the creation of a rational being in the text.

In contemporary clinical practice, "habits" were less viewed as the basis for Hartleyan associationism than as involving a perverse fixation with pathological connotations. Unshakeable habits that are pursued with unnatural passion were no longer a harmless routine that enabled one to establish associations. They were suggestive of the dangerous addiction of the senses over which the mind has no control.

Margaret Homans characterises the solitary pursuit of Victor Frankenstein in abstract terms. She interprets his scientific creation as the “aggrandisement of masculine creativity” and the “circumvention of the maternal,”⁶ which is thematically pertinent to a feminist discourse. Yet, if we are to historicise the figure of a male solitary pursuit in this period, it becomes clear that Shelley also denuounces the diseased body, for she characterises Victor as an addicted figure. In Chapter 3 I try to show that Godwin’s creation of the alchemist in his *St. Leon* makes an interesting analogy with the scientist in *Frankenstein*.

Passions had a pathological connotation, but in a specific context they were eulogised as a sign of genius. The art of sensibility, as Raymond Williams remarks, “became specialized during the course of the eighteenth century.”⁷ The words such as “creative,” “original” and “genius” were no longer considered as “characteristic disposition,” but “exalted special ability” (ibid., 44). Following Dr Johnson’s definition that sensibility is “[q]uickness of sensation, quickness of perception, delicacy,”⁸ Wollstonecraft affirms in her essay ‘On Poetry,’ that genius possesses “quick,” “strong” and “exquisite” sensibility.⁹ She celebrates the “masculinization” of feminine gender traits in *The Rights of Woman*, but she does not reject female sensibility altogether. She strives to salvage female sensibility by severing it from its recurring connection with

⁶ Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1986), p.105.

⁷ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987), p.43.

⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989) vol.5, p.132. Hereafter cited as *VRW* with page numbers in parentheses.

⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, “On Poetry” in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989) vol.7, pp.7-9. Hereafter cited as *OP* with page numbers in parentheses.

sensuality. While deriding the sensual body, she tries to exemplify the “naturalisation” or even “exaltation” of female sensibility in *Mary, A Fiction*. However, as her equivocal response to Edmund Burke’s sensationist aesthetic illustrates—which I intend to take up in this thesis—her views on the female body are greatly problematic for her. In Chapters 4 and 5 I examine the representation of female genius which Wollstonecraft creates as a political gesture to rebuke her male adversaries, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Burke.

As Chris Jones has argued, sensibility, when associated with a man of feeling, signifies effeminate “sentimentalism,” but “radical sensibility” in a political usage is frequently understood as aspiration towards a better state of society, epitomising the movement towards the French Revolution.¹⁰ The ascendancy of republicanism and individualism among the radicals was strongly reflected in their critical view on the hierarchical organisation of the body-politic. In conservative rhetoric, however, the body-politic will not sustain its operation without the control of the head of state, meaning the monarch, for the actual body of state is incapable of self-management. The justification lies in the conservative belief that sensibility, when it is bound with radicalism, is represented by revolutionary men who are not men at all, but “monsters.”¹¹ These varied assessments of revolutionary men served their own interests or even “needs” to defend their views.¹² Wollstonecraft strove to redefine the

¹⁰ Chris Jones, “Radical Sensibility in the 1790s” in *Reflections of Revolution: Images of Romanticism* Ed. Alison Yarrington and Kelvin Everest (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 69. See also Gary Kelly’s *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789-1830* (London: Longman, 1989), p.40.

¹¹ Claudia Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s* Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1996), p.11.

¹² According to Kathryn Sutherland, women writers, notably Wollstonecraft, were engaged in fashioning a discourse appropriate to their peculiar needs as women. See “Hannah More’s Counter Revolutionary Feminism” in *Revolution in Writing: British*

accountable agency to restore the power to a rightful place, that is, to a large part of what makes up the body of nation. The key notions of “self-management” and empiricism are discussed in Chapter 6 in relation to Wollstonecraft’s *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*.

What runs deep through the whole debate on the metaphor of the body is the polemic of the im/materiality of the life principle. Even in the political debate on the French Revolution, the question of whether the spiritual head or the material body of the state takes charge of the operation of the entire body-politic was the focal point in the Burke-Wollstonecraft debate. The materialist theory of Erasmus Darwin, Xavier Bichat and William Lawrence is crucial for understanding the profound resonances between Shelley’s image of the monster in *Frankenstein* and the organic feature of the body represented by these medical writers. Their view that the organs themselves keep the vital powers in motion is represented in the figure of the monster. The organic theory is not only contrasted with the earlier mechanical theory of Hartley and Priestley, but also set against the immaterial system that perceived the spirit as the regulator of the body. Chapter 7 chiefly discusses the symbolic importance of the monster as that which cannot be predicted or controlled.

In the process of secularisation, sensibility was increasingly alienated from the spiritual element of self to become part of the body. Shelley was indifferent to creating a female genius in her works, and her disavowal of an intellectually developed female character is also attributable to her failure to see the power of the mind over the body. The last chapter tries to understand the philosophical chasm between Wollstonecraft and

Shelley with special reference to the question of gender. I believe that the materialist theory of François-Joseph Gall was influential in forming Shelley's views on gender difference. Gall's theory which integrates sensibility into the function of the brain augmented the authority of matter, reducing the status of the mind. In Gall's system, not only the intellectual capacity but also the moral feelings are explained by an organ, the brain.

For many centuries it has been said, the brain is the organ of the soul; the meaning, however, of this expression was that the brain is the organ of the intellectual faculties, while, according to the ancient opinion, the feelings have been placed in the viscera of the abdomen and thorax. We consider the brain as the organ not only of the intellectual faculties, but also of the moral feelings.¹³

In a sense, Gall's materialism leaves little room for the development of sensibility, for moral character of an individual is more or less predetermined by the shape of his or her organs. To Shelley, a peculiar sensibility which is observable in men as well as typically feminine or maternal feelings could each be explained by Gall's phrenological theory, for gender traits, she believed, are attributable to sexual differences in the material mechanism. The absence of an empiricist dimension from her essentialist view, unlike her parents, may be understood in this context. Does lack or excess of certain material parts of the body ultimately justify the differences between men and women? Shelley's ontological inquiry suggests her critical position against Wollstonecraft's scheme to masculinise women's mind, but this does not mean that she is indifferent to her mother's commitment to female sensibility. Both perceive sensibility to be the powerful

¹³ J.G.Spurzheim, *Outlines of the Physiognomical System of Drs Gall and Spurzheim indicating the Dispositions and Manifestations of the Mind* (London, 1815), p.84.

component of the female body, which explains and justifies women's place in the domestic arena. The works of Godwin, Wollstonecraft and Shelley above all will not only serve as a fine example of the tide of the movement of sensibility, but also clarify the paradoxical nature of sensibility in a specific historical context where "passions" meant different things to different people.

1

Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century Medical Context

To medical historians or literary critics of the contextual approach studying the concept of *sensibility* in the eighteenth century the term brings to mind associations with things that are sensory: the senses, sensation, the body, and the brain. The term “sensory” is by itself controversial, for it does not necessarily signify the *organ* of sensation. Samuel Clarke in the early eighteenth century, for example, rejected the materialist notion of the brain and sense organs “as the means by which the mind sees or perceives” the images on the brain, for God does not see all things by any organs. What makes this issue more contentious is that Clarke attributes perception to “presence” of some form of spirit rather than to the solid body. His position is not entirely that of a spiritualist, however, for he assigns the principle of life to living substances: “a living substance can only there perceive where it is present either to the things themselves . . . or to the images of things.”¹⁴ As John Yolton has pointed out, this principle that “Nothing can any more act, or be acted upon, where it is not present” is repeated throughout the century.¹⁵ It is the equivocalness of the word “presence” that baffled the eighteenth-century medical thinkers and philosophers in conceptualising the soul and its power of perception. The

¹⁴ Samuel Clarke, *A Collection of Papers, Which Passed between the Late Learned Mr. Leibnitz and Dr. Clarke, in the Years 1715 and 1716; Relating to the Principles of Natural Philosophy and Religion* (London: J. Knapton, 1717), p.13.

¹⁵ John W. Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984), p.74.

ultimate question for these thinkers may be: is the power of perception a sufficient qualification for assuming the role of the human agency? If so, where is the source of power located?

Mid-eighteenth-century physicians agreed that vital reactivity, or in Hartley's term "vibration," was a revolutionary concept, a sort of "missing link" that would allow them to penetrate at last into the innermost workings of the human constitution.¹⁶ If the Cartesian soul was considered to be present in the mind, the nerve theorists and empiricist philosophers of the eighteenth century have shifted the soul's locus to the nerve, which can be determined neither as material nor spiritual. It is as it were the "bridge which possessed attributes of both mind and body."¹⁷

Hence, the eighteenth century saw the flourishing of research into the nervous system, for it was the key to the knowledge of the body-mind relationship. One of the most important early works that explores the nature of the nerves and their effect on sensibility is *The English Malady* (1733) by George Cheyne. He defines sensibility as "the Impulse, Motion or Action of Bodies, gently or violently impressing the Extremities or Sides of the Nerves, of the Skin, or other parts of the Body, which . . . conveys Motion to the sentient Principle in the Brain."¹⁸ A crucial feature of these cumulative works is a move away from Cartesian dualism of the body and the soul to "the new dualism" or "monism" which centres on the nervous system.¹⁹ In the early

¹⁶ Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p.106.

¹⁷ Christopher Lawrence, "The Nervous System and Society in the Scottish Enlightenment" in *Natural Order: Historical Studies of Scientific Culture* eds. Barry Barnes and Steven Shapin (Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1979), p.25.

¹⁸ George Cheyne, *The English Malady* (1733) ed. Roy Porter, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p.71. Henceafter cited as *EM* in parentheses with page numbers.

¹⁹ See G.S.Rousseau, "Science and the Discovery of the Imagination in Enlightened England" in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* vol.3 (1969), p.120. See also Christopher

nineteenth century, Rees' Cyclopaedia defines the nerves as organs which "have been considered . . . as designed to establish a communication, for the purposes of sensation and volition, between the brain and the organs of our body,"²⁰ which shows that the fundamental idea about the operation of the nerves did not change from the eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century .

These medical writers were curious about the intricate and dynamic processes of the nervous system. However, the object of their analysis was often invisible, for when the entire system is the unity in which body and soul communicate, the nervous diseases have an equivocal ground both real and illusory. They investigated the insides of the body, and very often had to draw conclusions about the function of these parts through imagining the cause and effect of their motions. As Foucault has argued,

. . . [corporeal density] is also a moral density; the resistance of the organs to the disordered penetration of the spirits is perhaps one and the same thing as that strength of soul which keeps the thoughts and the desires in order. . . . The "interior body" . . . was not the objective body available to the dull gaze of a neutralized observation; it was the site where a certain manner of imagining the body and of deciphering its internal movements combined with a certain manner of investing it with moral values.²¹

The body is certainly the site of "deciphering" the "interior body" or perhaps human nature, consequently encompassing the moral aspect of the body. This gives symbolic values to what these medical men have written in their scientific documents on the

Lawrence, (1979), p.24, 25.

²⁰ See Abraham Rees, *The Cyclopaedia; or Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature*, 41 vols. (London, 1819) Page numbers not printed.

²¹ See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1961), pp.148, 149.

issues about the nature of the vital force, how it produces motion, and the mechanistic aspects of the body.

The brain as a sense organ incorporates the meaning of both “physical” in the anatomical sense and “mental” in the psychological sense. Sensibility should be treated as an issue not only of the purely material body, but also of the “higher” or intellectual mind, which could be “elevated” by the rational faculty or by passions. It also concerns the “deranged” or “dejected” mind caused by nervous diseases, which are also the concern of psychiatric and psychological studies. We are therefore dealing with various fields of study, and three of these practices in modern times are more or less segregated from one another.²² It is crucial that the subjects which I raise in this dissertation are discussed in a way that justifies and respects the interdisciplinary aspects of the eighteenth-century scientific endeavour. Philosophers in this era felt free to appropriate Newtonian physics as readily as the metaphysics of John Locke. Edward Reed, for example, has made a point that some prominent medical scientists are unfairly denominated as “physiologists” and not psychologists, despite the fact that they have made a substantial contribution to the discovery of certain truth about the human mind. He argues that scientists such as Luigi Galvani, Alessandro Volta and Erasmus Darwin are not just physiologists but “psychologists.”²³ One could choose to describe Galvani’s discovery as that of the electrical basis of neural transmission if it is specifically a physiological phenomenon, but it can also be called research into the nature of vital and mental forces. Reed is right to say that the history of psychology should make contact with other areas of history, and the reverse is true with medical history.

²² Edward S. Reed, *From Soul to Mind: The Emergence of Psychology from Erasmus Darwin to William James* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), p.x.

²³ *ibid.*

Eighteenth-century philosophers, for example, concentrate on the individual's subjective awareness of selfhood and this has a profound bearing upon contemporary nerve theory. An examination of the careers and writings of such diverse eighteenth-century intellectuals as Robert Whytt, David Hume, David Hartley, William Cullen, John Brown, Erasmus Darwin, Julien Offray de La Mettrie and William Lawrence would reveal that there were many routes to Enlightenment thought, each thinker choosing his or her own approach to the traditions of the past while adapting to the new intellectual movement.

Whytt, an Edinburgh physician, who demonstrated the basic nerve mechanism of spinal reflexes in vertebrates, was one of the first to present a general picture of how the interior mechanism really works. Conceptually, the transition was made from spiritual soul to "sentient" soul by Whytt's experiments of the 1740s, though his controversy with Albrecht von Haller over the matter in the 1750s still shows his dismissal of absolute materialism. It was Whytt who discovered that sensory impulses are felt by a sentient principle that activates the other parts of the body into "sympathetic" motions. The workings of the mind are no longer explained wholly by the "soul": they are ultimately explained by a communication between the "sensible" impulses and other signals that are in charge of muscular movements. The sensory impulses of the nervous system are equally pivotal for the associationist philosophers, Hume, Hartley and Joseph Priestley. They perpetually asked the question, "Are the intellectual and moral capacities attributable to the principle of habits and custom which is the foundation of the mechanistic body, or the power of the free will?" This is ultimately a question of human agency, which was later explored by Godwin, Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley.

Sensible quality in a person also has social ramifications. It is sometimes associated with certain images peculiar to a specific class or sex. This is to imply that a disorder stems not entirely from natural factors, but also from the historical, social and cultural configurations of a distinctive way of living as a social elite or a fashionable woman of the eighteenth century. This way of thinking led physicians to assume more responsibility than just treating the patient. Drawing on the scientific thinking of cause and effect, physicians such as Cheyne, Brown, Darwin and Robert Jones tried to show how an ideal bodily state is maintained by keeping one's lifestyle under control. As Cheyne had stated, nervous disorders "are the Diseases of the Wealthy, the Voluptuous and the Lazy" (*EM* 158), and certain diseases can therefore be prevented by giving up typically tenacious and addictive habits practised by certain groups of people. This educationist approach was not just observed in Britain but also in the Continent. S.A.Tissot, for instance, made a certain generalisation about the type of people who are more vulnerable to these habits and consequently to various ailments that affect the nerves.

Since sensibility is one of those immensely problematic labels, inherently unstable in meaning, I will not endeavour to cover the whole cultural phenomenon that is related to the term, nor meticulously describe what is generally called the Cult of Sensibility. Rather my focus is on specific aspects of the medical discourse which I have already outlined above, and the several controversial tropes of the body which fed into the imagination of Godwin, Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley. One quickly discovers in their books the steady recurrence of various crucial concerns, often directly related to the significance of sensibility. First, I would like to examine the way in which the soul was gradually decentred and also internalised to become part of the body, thereby

destabilising the notion of the self. This discussion leads to the second section about the mechanistic image of the body. As a consequence the potency of the “rational soul” was weakened, leaving the locus of the moral agent highly obscure. Lastly, I will discuss the problem of the binary of the immaterial spirit and the material body.

1. Decentred Self

To study the progress by which the sensibility of the body became a major conceptual metaphor in the works of Godwin, Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, I will begin by discussing the function of the vital force, or in a more vague term, the soul while asking the following questions: (1) What connection could possibly exist between the material body and the spiritual faculties? (2) How does this relate to the problem of self-representation? Because the point of most contention for many eighteenth-century physiologists was the definition of the soul and its function, it is natural that they took particular interest in the seat of the soul. George Cheyne and Robert Whytt use words such as “sentient and intelligent soul” and “sentient soul” respectively but these words do not necessarily signify spiritual faculties that operate independently of the workings of the body. Both try to explain the operation of the soul in relation to the ruling mechanism of the nerves, making little reference to the rational soul or the consciousness of the mind that either controls or negotiates with the mechanism.

Instead of employing the Cartesian “rational soul” alone, Cheyne has it merge with what he calls the “sentient and intelligent principle” (*EM* 88). His usage of the two opposing words, “sentient” and “intelligent,” deserves a close analysis in that he uses them interchangeably or in a compound. An account of the immediacy of nervous response which is not censored by a conscious agent is best illustrated by his notion of

“Vibrations” (*EM* 89). Nerves, it is said, terminate at the “Temple of sensorium” (*EM* 88) of the “Soul” (*EM* 4), and are placed in the brain. The brain, furthermore, is compared to an Organ-Room in which the soul like a “Musician” (*EM* 71) plays the organ, a musical instrument. Interestingly the chords of the organ are the metaphor for “Nerves”: “Keys, which, being struck on or touch’d, convey the Sound and Harmony” (*EM* 5). Cheyne employs the metaphor of music or harmony in characterising the powers of the “whole” nervous systems. Newton’s vocabulary of “Aethereal vibrations”²⁴ is converted into the vibrations of nerves which are plucked or played like a musical instrument (*EM* 88). These “Vibrations,” Cheyne argues, are “propagated through their Lengths by a subtile, spirituous, and infinitely elastick Fluid, which is the Medium of the Intelligent Principle” (*EM* 89).

Cheyne’s metaphor of a musician and the organ presents a whole different picture from the Cartesian metaphor of a pilot in his ship.²⁵ First, an obvious point has to be made that these two do not simply present a parallel. How one relates to a musical instrument is clearly different from his/her relation with a vessel. Music itself has an evocation of something more than making the object move. The metaphor of music associates the soul with the emotive or non-rational faculty, whereas the Cartesian soul implied rationality or consciousness. Cheyne’s trope of the “Musician,” we could say, obscures the existence of consciousness or will.

He also projects his image of the body as a machine or what he calls the “organical Machin [sic]” (*EM* 68). This is analogous to Descartes’s metaphor of a clock

²⁴ Isaac Newton, “Hypothesis of Light” from *Quaestiones quaedam philosophicae* in *A Norton Critical Edition: Newton* Ed. Bernard Cohen and Richard S. Westfall (New York and London: W.W.Norton & Company, 1995), p.24.

²⁵ Rene Desartes, *Discourse on Method an The Meditations* (1637) trans. and ed. F.E. Sutcliffe (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p.159.

“made up of wheels and counterweights” or a machine “so built and composed of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood and skin” in *Discourse on Method and the Meditations* (1637).²⁶ Cheyne similarly highlights the mechanical properties of the body solids, which maintain the flow of the “Liquors and Fluids” conveying blood, air, the “nutritive Juices” (EM11) and other fluids: “the Human Body is a Machin [sic] of an infinite Number and Variety of different Channels and Pipes, filled with various and different Liquors and Fluids” (EM 4). In addition to keeping the “Tubes” and pipes from clogging, the healthy state of the nerves is vital. Cheyne characterises the motion of the “sentient and intelligent Principle” through the nerves as “Self-motive” (EM 92). However this seems to cause ambivalence, for, like the word “voluntary,” the meaning alternates depending on where the agent is placed. If it is the sentient principle moving everywhere throughout the body that is self-active and not the rational mind, the operation can be characterised as wholly reflexive rather than rational.

This preoccupation with the nervous system came to dominate the Edinburgh physiology led by people like Whytt, William Cullen and John Brown. This provided a theoretical framework for later prominent physicians such as Erasmus Darwin and William Lawrence. Whytt in his medical treatises does not place the ultimate soul in the brain, but figuratively dissolves it to all the sensible organs. Although Whytt, in his *Physiological Essays* (1745), attacks Albrecht von Haller’s theory that irritability is an innate property of “glutinous”²⁷ animal bodies, he holds the same premise that the mind has no absolute power over the body.²⁸ Haller argues,

²⁶ Rene Descartes, (1968), pp.162, 163.

²⁷ Albrecht von Haller, *First Lines of Physiology* 1786 edition (New York & London: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1966), p.226. Hereafter cited as *FL* with page numbers in parentheses.

²⁸ Haller was a student of Boerhaave of Leyden who was the leading authority on the

. . . it is evidently a false position, that all the motions of the body arise from the mind, without which the body would be an immoveable unactive mass: for the force of muscular contraction, by any kind of stimulus, to which the motion of the heart, intestines, and perhaps all the other motions in the human body are obedient, does not require the presence of the mind.” (FL 48, 49)

This depiction is in direct opposition to Descartes’ notion of the self. In like manner, Whytt postulates that the agent (“Soul”) which “perceives” or “feels” (PE 188) the stimulus, resides in the “intestine” as well as in any other organ of the body (PE 144, 168). A muscle reaction, therefore, becomes “unconscious perception” for Whytt.²⁹

What is most original about Whytt’s rhetoric is that he remaps the topography of the sensory faculties by comparing them to various musical instruments constituting an orchestra.

It will be unfair to object here, that we ascribe the intelligent powers of the mind to the bodily organs: for as the best musician cannot make a flute give the sound of a violin, nor a harpsicord that of a French horn, nor without these several instruments produce their sounds and notes at all; in like manner, the soul, in the present state can only exercise its rational powers in the brain; it can only taste in the tongue, smell in the nose, see in the eyes, hear in the ears, and feel hunger in the stomach.³⁰

hydrodynamic principle of the body. He was most renowned for the theory of irritability and had much influence on the Edinburgh medical school.

²⁹ R.K.French, *Robert Whytt, the Soul, and Medicine* (London: The Wellcome Institute of the History of Medicine, 1969), p.71.

³⁰ Whytt, Robert. *Physiological Essays containing I. An Inquiry into the Causes which promote the Circulation of the Fluids in the very Small Vessels of Animals, II. Observations on the Sensibility and Irritability of the Parts of Men and other Animals, occasioned by Dr Haller’s late Treatises on these Subjects* (Edinburgh: Hamilton, Balfour and Neill, 1745), pp.171, 172. Hereafter cited as PE in parentheses with page numbers.

This idea that a sensory faculty which he calls “the soul” could be in the brain as well as in the tongue, the nose, the eyes or the ears was revolutionary. Whytt’s metaphor is akin to Cheyne’s musical metaphor, except that the latter considered that there is a sole cause of motion. Whytt considers that the soul is as equally present in the extremities of the nerves as in the brain, and his conceptual soul became effectually decentered throughout the body (*PE* 170). This is not to say that he gives power to matter. Whytt is suggesting that irritable parts are endued with the sentient soul that binds the mind and body. The soul in the nerves, as it were, is the agent of perception. He believes that the “sympathy” or “consent between various parts of the body”³¹ through the affections of the brain presupposes that irritability is a power of the “sentient soul.”

William Cullen’s physiological system provides a particularly illuminating perspective from which we can observe how late eighteenth-century medical discourse relied on earlier medical theories. He incorporates Cheyne’s notion of vibration when he explains that “the animal system is a tremulous oscillatory mass of matter.” That “these are the manifest result of mechanical tension and oscillation” is also reminiscent of Hartley’s mechanistic rhetoric which will be discussed in more depth in the following section.³² Cullen’s theory of the nervous system particularly has much resonance with that of Whytt in that he uses the idea of “sympathy” (*CL* 9): “In one case, the term sympathy may properly be applied; when, upon an impression being made, any set of nerves may be put in action, not in consequence of the sensorium itself being affected, but some particular nerves (*CL* 27). Whytt’s idea that there are many sources of action,

³¹ Robert Whytt, *Observations on the Nature, causes, and cure of those Disorders which have been commonly called Nervous, Hypochondriac, or Hysteric* Second Edition (Edinburgh, 1765), p.v. Hereafter cited as *ON* with page numbers in parentheses.

³² William Cullen, *Clinical Lectures, Delivered At Edingburgh in the year 1765-6* (London, 1797), pp.18,19. Hereafter cited as *CL* with page numbers in parentheses.

and that the cause of action is not the “sensorium” is here reiterated.

The thoughts and principles of David Hume and Thomas Reid also have their roots in nerve theory. The dispersal of “souls” is strongly reflected in their philosophy. The nature of “perception” is inherently connected with the problem of human agency and self-representation. That ideas are sensory impressions of bodily states became a premise for Hume’s philosophy, and the question about the sources and the strength of personal identity raised in *A Treatise on Human Nature* was closely connected with his belief that mental states can be accounted for by the associations made by the nervous system. Hume defines the self as “that connected succession of perceptions”³³ or “a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement” (*HN* 252).

For a sceptic like Hume, the law of mechanism or associationism led to a dead-end over which no independent agency has the control. On the basis that the idea of self or substance is never as simple as a table or chimney, he explains, “I cannot perceive this self without some one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive any thing but the perceptions” (*HN* 634). When he turns his attention to the notion of “personal identity” in his appendix of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he finds himself “invol’d in such a labyrinth”: “I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent” (*HN* 633). The major difference between Hume and Reid is that the latter does not hesitate to proceed into the winding paths of the “labyrinth” that constitutes the self: “if we stop where we can trace it no farther, and secure the ground we have gained, there is no harm done” (*Inquiry* 15). Reid is no less

³³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, M.A. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), p.277. Hereafter cited as *HN* with page numbers in parentheses.

conscious of the intricacy or uncertainty of the existence of the self than Hume is, but he dares articulate that he is resolved to take his own existence and the existence of other things upon trust.³⁴

For Hume, it was a “bundle” of different perceptions which brings about confusion in delineating one clear idea of the self. This is reminiscent of Haller’s ontological argument which complicates the meaning of “perception.” According to Haller, when we perceive, “five very different beings are joined together: the body which we perceive; the affection of the organ of the sensory by that body; the affection of the brain arising from the percussion of that sensory; the change produced in the mind; and lastly, the mind’s consciousness and perception of the sensation” (*FL* 33). The mind no longer has the prerogative of perceiving. As we have observed, this tendency to decentre human agency was typified by Whytt’s representation of self or the “soul.”

2. The Mechanistic Image of the Body

The “sympathetic” movement of the inner soul is a phenomenon that appears to elucidate the body-mind relationship, but in actuality complicates the locus of the soul. The nervous system as a kind of passage for transmitting cortical impressions becomes “mechanistic” in that the self is the product of various forces, impressions and ideas from outside. Reid objects to this model of the human being which operates like a self-propelling machine. Physiologists and some philosophers tried to show that sensory and therefore unintentional states cause the perceptual and subsequently mental states,

³⁴ Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* 1764. ed. Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p.24. Hereafter cited as *Inquiry* with page numbers in parentheses.

whereas Reid observes that these physical stimuli cannot be sufficient cause of mental states. Reid believes that human belief or experience cannot simply be reduced to matter, motion or vibration. Whichever side they were on, the proponents of the mechanistic or anti-mechanistic systems of the body, were actively engaged in trying to understand the nature of the moral and intellectual capacities of the nerves.

In his *Observations on Man* (1749),³⁵ Hartley develops a mechanistic theory of the body, applying Newtonian science to his theory of vibration. He states that vibration “agitate[s] the small particles of the medullary substance of the sensory nerves with synchronous vibrations, in the same manner as the vibrations of the air in sounds agitate many regular bodies with corresponding vibrations or tremblings.”³⁶ He tries to explain the internal actions of swallowing, breathing, or coughing which he calls “automatic motions” as well as the sensory and mental actions by the system of vibrations: “if the doctrine of association be founded in, and deducible from, that of vibrations . . . , then all the sensations, ideas, and motions, of all animals, will be conducted according to the vibrations of the small medullary particles.” (*OM* i 109). However, he admits that this kind of “mechanical system” (*OM* i 508) of the nerves “takes away philosophical free-will” and “overturn[s] all the arguments which are usually brought for the immateriality of the soul from the subtlety of the internal senses, and of the rational faculty” (*OM* i 511, 512). Like Whytt, Hartley believes that “the sensibility of each part [of the body] does depend, in great measure, on the number, structure, and disposition of the nervous papillae, which are the immediate organ in the

³⁵ *Observations on Man* was still current in the late eighteenth century and promulgated amongst Romantic writers, including the members of the Godwin family, and had particularly influenced the philosophical thinking of William Godwin.

³⁶ David Hartley, *Observations on Man* 1749, 1791 (Poole & Washington D.C.: Woodstock Books, 1998), p.22. Hereafter vol.1 will be cited as *OM*i and vol.2 as *OM*ii

senses of feeling, taste, and smell . . .” (*OM* i 43). Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that Hartley regards the “structure” of the nerves as most important, whereas Whytt presupposes the existence of an entity called the “sentient principle” in the nerve which can be defined neither as material nor spiritual.

Many intellectuals in the eighteenth century in one way or another used John Locke’s philosophical ideas particularly in asking the epistemological question on the sources of self. Erasmus Darwin, an enlightened thinker and a well known physician, also follows this materialist tradition.³⁷ He believes that “nothing can come into the intellect but through the senses.”³⁸ This idea resonates with the Lockean notion of knowledge being derived from the sense organs. In *The Temple of Nature* (1803), he expresses the image of the process through which the sensitive nerves eventually determine the mental condition. When sensation “permeates” the brain, his poem reads, “quick Volitions rise” from pain and pleasure. This “point[s] the inquiring eyes; / With Reason’s light bewilder’d Man direct, / And right and wrong with balance nice detect.” Lastly “Associations spring, / Thoughts join to thoughts, to motions motions cling.” For Darwin, therefore, this chain reaction which he calls the “long trains of catenation” is itself the controlling factor.³⁹ It is not to be interrupted by a spiritual soul. The

in parentheses with page numbers.

³⁷ Erasmus Darwin was the core member of the Lunar Society of Birmingham, which is often seen as “the main intellectual powerhouse of the Industrial Revolution in England.” See Desmond King-Hele’s *Erasmus Darwin: A Life of Unequalled Achievement* (London: Giles de la Mare Publishers, 1999), p.ix. Jenny Uglow has described him as “enormously gifted and enormously fat.” See Jenny Uglow’s *Lunar Men: Five Friends Whose Curiosity Changed the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), p.xiv.

³⁸ Erasmus Darwin, *The Letters of Erasmus Darwin* ed. Desmond King-Hele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.243.

³⁹ Erasmus Darwin, *The Temple of Nature* (Menston, Yorkshire and London: Scholar Press, 1973), pp.24, 25. Canto I, ll.269-281. Hereafter cited as *TN* with page numbers and line numbers in parentheses.

succession of these motions produces both reason (“Reason’s light”) and moral judgement (“right and wrong”).

La Mettrie,⁴⁰ a French physician, had worked through the philosophical tradition and also found Locke’s materialism congenial to his thinking, for he too explores the development of the senses in his medical treatise.⁴¹ In a sense his aim was to lend substance to Locke’s epistemology by providing physiological evidence, though his treatise provides evidence of a closer anatomical or physiological correlation between mental states and physiological processes than Locke allows. The metaphor of the machine as the human body precedes his famous *Man a Machine* (1749)⁴² as we have already seen in the language of Descartes and Cheyne. La Mettrie’s version of the “machine,” however, denies the Cartesian dualism of the body and the soul. The body, he states,

. . . winds itself up, a living picture of perpetual motion. Food maintains what is aroused by fever. Without it, the soul languishes, becomes furious and dies dejected. It is like a candle whose light flares up just as it is going out.⁴³

⁴⁰ La Mettrie, was also influenced by and a student of Boerhaave like Haller. La Mettrie’s annotated translation of Boerhaave caused havoc between La Mettrie and Haller. The latter charged the former for plagiarism.

⁴¹ Although Locke’s reception varies both in England and France, Locke’s *Essay* is said to have raised a furore in England about its deistic and materialistic implications. In France Locke was widely understood as a materialist. See John Yolton’s *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1983). John Yolton has pointed to several other factors which help explain this particular aspect of Locke’s philosophical legacy in France in his ‘French Materialist Disciples of Locke,’ *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25, no.1 (Jan.1987), pp.83-104.

⁴² *Man a Machine* was first published as *L’Homme machine* anonymously by Elie Luzac in Leyden, towards the end of 1747, but dated 1748. An English translation was published as *Man a Machine* in London by W. Owen in 1749, and reprinted in 1750 giving the author as La Mettrie.

⁴³ Julien Offray De La Mettrie, *Machine Man and Other Writings* trans. Ann Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.7. Hereafter cited as *MM* with page numbers in parentheses.

The soul and the body are interdependent in La Mettrie's model. He maintains that the connection between the body and the soul is so close that they form a single entity which must be material and extended. While the nature of the soul was generally debatable at the time, he was convinced of the material nature of the sensitive soul. The material intake of food and drink is directly connected to the "soul," which leaves no room for anything occult, such as the immortal soul or spirit. He then continues,

But if you feed the body, pour into its pipes vigorous sugars and strong liquors, then the soul becomes as generous as they are and arms itself with proud courage, and the soldier who would have fled if given water becomes ferocious and gaily runs to his death to the sound of drums (*ibid.*).⁴⁴

Here the soul is given a personality that is "generous," which is almost saying that the nerves are the ultimate agent.

Opium's effect on sleep is a demonstrative case for La Mettrie. He shows that the state of the body needs to be in harmony with that of the soul in order that both can experience a peaceful sleep. "As the blood's movement is calmed, a sweet feeling of peace and calm spreads throughout the machine," but when "the circulation is too rapid," he maintains, "the soul cannot sleep." Opium, according to La Mettrie, can inebriate or cause lethargy, as does wine, depending on the dose. He celebrates the power of material substances, such as opium, stating that it "even changes the will; it forces the soul, which wanted to stay awake and enjoy itself, to go to bed despite itself." (*MM* 7).⁴⁵

⁴⁴ His reference to "courage" and "the sound of drum" exemplifies his experience as a doctor to the soldiers of the French Guards.

⁴⁵ It is interesting that Hartley gives a similar explanation for the effect of opium, though he gives a microscopic view of it. The opiate particles, he says, "excite vibrations of the same kind in all the parts of the body, after they are taken into the

The importance of this materialist reworking of Lockean epistemology is reflected in his idea that human behaviour could be more accurately discussed as motivated by the appetites and instincts man shares with animals. Do animals have the same senses as man; are they therefore in the same rank with man in moral and intellectual qualities? These two interrelated issues were both controversial in that the soul's exposure to material influences, both external and internal, meant that the human soul which was supposed to be nobler would be in danger of mixing with the "inferior" species. La Mettrie uses the word "machine" as a significant link of human to animals. He presents the system of education simply in terms of the mechanism of association. Once again, the musical metaphor is employed to illustrate how man came to acquire knowledge and refine language skills. As a "violin string or a harpsichord key vibrates" and gives out a sound, La Mettrie explains, so "the strings of the brain, struck by rays of sound, are stimulated to give out or repeat the words which touch them" (*MM* 14). As he states, it "all comes down to sounds, or words, which are transmitted from one person's mouth, through another's ear and into his brain, which receives at the same time through his eyes the shape of the bodies for which the words are the arbitrary signs" (*MM* 13). Thus, he tries to demonstrate that animals which he calls "machines . . . were made like us to think and to feel nature's promptings" (*MM* 19). That these words and the figures are closely linked in the brain is depicted as a form of "training," and if animals were perfectly trained, just like human beings are, La Mettrie believed that they would be able to learn a language.

In his philosophical treatise *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, Reid takes

blood, and circulate with it." These vibrations from the brain and spinal marrow agitate the limbs and other parts so much as to render them "unfit for receiving sensation and motion" (*OMi* 50).

issue with his predecessors who compare the system of the human mind to a machine. He explores the nature of the human faculties, the system of the mind, the laws of our constitution and the various phenomena of human nature. Though he makes use of the Lockean terminology of “sensation,” he refutes Locke’s opinion that “all our simple ideas are got, either by Sensation or by Reflection—that is, by our external senses, or by consciousness of the operations of our own minds,”⁴⁶ for he did not believe that the idea of power could be derived from these two sources only. To demonstrate the extent of human power in his own terms, he “invent[s]” new principles of action; mechanical, animal and rational (*APM* 545). This does not mean that he is entirely oblivious of the influence of the nerves on the mechanical movement of the body. For him the mechanical principle operates in collaboration with the other two principles.

A man knows that he must swallow his food before it can nourish him All the requisite motions of nerves and muscles immediately take place in their proper order, without his knowing or willing anything about them This is the case, in some degree, in every voluntary motion of our body I know nothing, I think nothing, either of nerves or muscles, when I stretch out my arm: yet this nervous influence, and this contraction of the muscles, uncalled by me, immediately produce the effect which I willed. (*APM* 547)

This is what Hartley has called “automatic motion,” but Reid has named it “instinct.” Reid’s other mechanical principle of human action, “habit,” is defined as “A facility of doing a thing, acquired by having done it frequently” (*APM* 550). This part is clearly an echo from Hartley’s associationism. By “mechanical” eighteenth-century thinkers seem

⁴⁶ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, in *The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.* (Edinburgh: Maclachlan, Stewart and Co., 1896), p.518. Henceafter cited as *APM* with page numbers in parentheses.

to have generally meant “automatic” or “habitual” with a predictable correlation or an implicit determinism.

Reid, in contrast to Hartley’s associationist theory, sets two stages in man’s cognitive development. In the first part of life, he says, “we have many enjoyments of various kinds; but very similar to those of brute-animals.” This stage relies mostly on “the exercise of our senses and powers of motion, the gratification of our appetites, and the exertions of our kind affections” (*APM* 580). In the second stage, he says, “we have the conception of what is good or ill for us upon the whole” and “are led . . . to seek the good and avoid the ill” (*APM* 581). He maintains that there is a special “talent” in man called “Reason,” a principle by which “our belief and opinions ought to be regulated.” He adds that this principle indicates a sound mind which is “distinguished from [that of] brutes, idiots, and infants” (*APM* 579). This, he argues, should be a “leading and governing principle, to which all our animal principles are subordinate, and to which they ought to be subject” (*APM* 580). It is by now clear that there were chiefly two approaches to the soul. While Reid attempted to establish a distinction between man and animal by ascribing to special quality in man, La Mettrie and Hartley tried to level this off by offering a great many physical factors that would help explain human behaviour.

3. The Dynamism of Passions

By medicalising the soul or rather mechanising it, medical theorists such as David Hartley, Erasmus Darwin and La Mettrie show how the mind progresses with the body, thereby softening the dualism as it were. The soul for La Mettrie represents the totality of an individual’s feelings or sense experience, for various sensations are carried to

what he calls the “sensitive soul.”⁴⁷ According to La Mettrie, “[w]e need only to have eyes to see the necessary influence of age on reason” because the soul “follows the body’s progression, as it does that of education” (*MM* 8). However, the closer the metaphysical position of the mind and body become tied in one extension, the more ambiguous the causality theme becomes. Moreover, the sympathetic nerves meant that the body is always in a state of flux, for changes are affected by the dynamism of passions. On the one hand, the powerful notion that the passions take over the body and eventually the mind permeated medical, philosophical and literary writings, which signifies that both the body and the mind are passive when they are controlled by the passions. On the other hand, the nerves have much more than a passive mechanism, in that sensibility is a capacity to mediate between the mind and the surrounding universe. It plays a formative role not only in determining an individual’s type of intelligence, but also in developing moral and intellectual capacities. There are three major issues I would like to take up here: (1) What is the relationship between sensibility and intelligence? (2) Were nervous diseases considered to be gender-specific? (3) How do passions affect moral development?

What does “acute,” “quick” or “delicate” sensibility signify? Eighteenth-century medical theorists share more or less the same lexicon in describing feelings, perception and passions. Cheyne divides “Mankind, into Quick Thinkers, Slow Thinkers, and No Thinkers” (*EM* 182), commending the quick reaction of the nerves. Whytt observes that the state of feelings, whether they are “quick” or “dull, slow, and difficult to be roused,” depends on the material constitution of the persons (*ON* 113).

⁴⁷ Julien Offray de La Mettrie. *Treatise on the Soul*. In *Machine Man and Other Writings* trans. Ann Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.57. Hereafter cited as *TS* with page numbers in parentheses.

This was also Cheyne's argument: "there is a certain Tone, Consistence, Firmness, and a determin'd Degree of Elasticity and Tension of the Nerves or Fibres . . . necessary to the perfect Performance of the Animal Functions" (*EM* 66). The whole debate on the firmness of the nerves seems to demonstrate that the soul or intelligence follows the progression of the body solids as La Mettrie would have argued. For this reason, it seems contradictory when these physiologists characterise the nerves as "weak," for weakness in the nerves has a certain pathological resonance; as Cheyne articulates "Soft and yielding, loose and flabby Flesh and Muscles are sure Symptoms of weak and relaxed nerves or fibres" (*EM* 102). Whytt similarly argues that a "delicate or easily irritable nervous system" is more liable to various ailments "from causes affecting either the body or mind" (*ON* 115).

For Cheyne, however, weak nerves were a marker of intellectual activity. In other words, the state of the nerves could be natural and also produced by diseases or a particular manner of living. This is to suggest that the weak nerves are the cause of intelligence *and* the effect of straining them too much. According to Cheyne,

Persons of slender and weak Nerves are generally of the first Class: the Activity, Mobility, and Delicacy or their intellectual Organs make them so, and thereby weakens and relaxes the Material Organs of the intellectual Faculties (*EM* 182).

"Delicacy" connotes the sophistication that is required for intellectual pursuits. Words such as "weak" and "delicate" therefore project a complex idea. While they suggest the status of the intellectuals who possess unequal sensibility, they bear the stigma of physical degeneration. Richard Blackmore's description of "Hypochondriacal Persons" is reminiscent of Cheyne's depiction of scholars. Blackmore characterises a

hypochondriac, a person with a nervous disorder, as “endowed with a great Share of Understanding and Judgement, with strong and clear Reason, a quick Apprehension and Vivacity of Fancy and Imagination, even above other Men.”⁴⁸ Delicate sensibility had a positive meaning in describing the excellence of the mind, juxtaposing rational capacity with imagination.

Both Godwin and Wollstonecraft held an equivocal position about the origin of self—whether “sensibility,” which was the “*manie* of the day,”⁴⁹ could be the potent force of human action. Wollstonecraft attempted to make a persuasive case for women who are capable of exercising reason over their bodily desire, but had to face two philosophical impasses. First, as we have already seen above, the boundary between reason and sensibility was increasingly blurred in terms of how they operate inside the entity called “self.” Second, the adjective “weak,” when applied to the features of the female sex, did not necessarily connote the same intellectual sophistication as suggested by Cheyne. It simply meant that women were more passive or vulnerable to violent passions and disorders. The nervous disorders for many eighteenth-century physiologists were gender-specific. Whytt, for instance, states that, “[w]omen, in whom the nervous system is generally more moveable than in men, are more subject to nervous complaints, and have them in a higher degree” (ON 118). As Roy Porter asserts, healthy nerves in eighteenth-century medical discourse were considered as masculine attributes because they were strong, hard and resilient, while weak nerves were soft,

⁴⁸ Richard Blackmore, *A Treatise of the Spleen and Vapours* (London, 1725), p.24. Quoted in John Mullan’s *Sentiment and Socialbility: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp.205, 206.

⁴⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft. *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1791) in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* vol.5 (London: William Pickering, 1989), p. 8. Hereafter cited as *VRM* with page numbers in parentheses.

languid, passive and “feminine.”⁵⁰

When Cullen introduced two genera of nervous disorders, hypochondriacal and hysterical affections, he could not avoid associating hysterical affections with what was generally termed “feminine.” His intention is to avoid gender-specific categories, as he insists that these two are “not to be distinguished by the difference of sex they are found in . . . but by a particular concurrence of symptoms” (*CL* 38, 39). However in his description, he falls back on quintessential gender types. Hypochondriasis which, he says, prevails in the melancholic temperament is more frequently observed in men (*CL* 45). Persons of melancholic constitution are said to be “capable of most attention” and are liable to an “intense application of the mind, not to literature only, but to any business or employment” (*CL* 52, 53). This is perhaps a refinement of Cheyne’s “English malady.” Cullen crystallises the cause and effect relationship of the nervous disorder which is associated with sedentary intellectual life. There are no feminine traits such as “weakness” or “delicacy” in hypochondriac disease.

A more feminine nervous disorder is separately classed as hysteria. This is said to be generally observable in persons who are vulnerable to “[s]udden passions of the mind” (*CL* 42), and is observable in the body that undergoes various changes or “[v]icissitudes.” This disease, he says, is “more frequently found in women than men” (*CL* 43). When he describes the type of people who are vulnerable to hysteria, he uses certain features that could be associated with women: it “chiefly prevails in sanguine constitutions, of a smooth thin skin, where the contents of the arteries are easily seen, and the complexion is consequently florid, of a somewhat lax habit, but full and

⁵⁰ Roy Porter, Introduction to George Cheyne’s *English Malady* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p.xli.

plethoric, with hair commonly pale or reddish, and generally soft and lank (*CL* 43). While safeguarding himself from an accusation of gender bias, he is giving certain ideas about women. They are lax, changeable, and more susceptible to passions.

La Mettrie similarly characterises the soul of “the fair sex” as “based on passion rather than reason,” for it follows the delicacy of the temperament. In men, on the contrary, brains and nerves are said to have “the firmness of all solids, the mind, like the features, is more lively.” Furthermore, he argues that education, which women lack, reinforces this tendency (*MM* 8). The implication is that the practice of intense thinking to which intellectuals or scholars are devoted can be dangerous to the health of women, because it overstimulates their brain. Intense mental stimulation can exhaust the fibres of the brain, just as immoderate physical exertion wears out the fibres in the muscles, and women who lack the firmness of the nervous fibres will not bear this mental exertion.

Both Cullen and his pupil John Brown register the disturbing effects of the passions. The excess (or defect) of passions was considered to be damaging to the whole nervous system. The originally weak or delicate frame of the body or its solids will be worn out by the powerful movement of the animal spirits, which may in due course exhaust themselves. According to Cullen, when passions or “violent emotions of the active kind, such as joy and anger” act strongly, and immediately, on the energy of the brain, “the blood is impelled into the vessels of the head with violence, and in a larger quantity.”⁵¹ He warns that “[a]ll strong impressions” which excite any emotion or passion of the mind are to be most carefully guarded against (*FL* iii 348, 349). Cullen

⁵¹ William Cullen, *First Lines of the Practice of Physic* 4th edition. vol.III (Edinburgh, 1784), pp.321,322. Hereafter cited as *FL* iii with page numbers in parentheses.

emphasises the significance of strengthening the solid part of the body in order to sustain the perfect nervous organisation. He believes that exercise “strengthens[s] the inherent power of the solid or moving fibres”(FL iii 354). Cullen emphasises the significance of strengthening the solid part of the body in order to sustain the perfect nervous organisation. He believes that exercise “strengthens[s] the inherent power of the solid or moving fibres”(FL iii 354). This materialistic idea was incorporated into Darwin’s *Zoonomia* (1794, 1796). Darwin says that there are diseases “produced by the susceptibility of the constitution to motions causable by these sensations being too dull or too vivid” and this susceptibility of the system to sensitive motions is for him “sensibility.”⁵²

Thomas Beddoes, in his biographical Preface to John Brown’s *The Elements of Medicine*, rightly hints at the paradox of the passions, where “the application of these powers [of passions], though it brings forth life, . . . wastes the excitability or matter of life,” and just as “the air blown into the fire brings forth more flame, but wastes the fuel or matter of fire.”⁵³ This is a very apt description of Brown’s argument, for he maintains that the doctrine of heat and cold is exactly applicable to the passions: “The subject of the passions admits of the same reasoning in every respect as that of heat.”⁵⁴ Passions were naturally likened to “fire,” and the key to the removal of diseases, for Brown, was adjusting the heat, or “excitability,” produced by the external and internal stimulants. Brown adopted this term to express the “disposition to action,” which

⁵² Erasmus Darwin, *Zoonomia; or The Laws of Organic Life* Part I 1794, Part II & III 1796. (New York, A.M.S. Press, 1974), p.59. Hereafter cited as *Zoonomia* i and *Zoonomia* ii respectively with page numbers in parentheses.

⁵³ See “A Biographical Preface by Thomas Beddoes” in *The Elements of Medicine*. Two volumes. John Brown. (London: J.Johnson, 1795), p.cxxxii.

⁵⁴ John Brown, *The Elements of Medicine* vol.I (London: J.Johnson, 1795), p.13. Hereafter cited as *Elements* with page numbers in parentheses.

replaced the terms such as irritability and sensibility (*Elements* Part I 11). Too much or too little passion was regarded as harmful to health. The middle range between high heat which Brown calls “ardor” and cold is considered to be ideal, or what he calls “moderate” or “agreeable” temperature (*Elements* Part II 9). He advises that one “should keep his mind in gentle action, observe moderation in his passions, and court agreeable objects of sense” (*Elements* Part II 17).

It is interesting to observe that Hume specifically makes a distinction between the violent type of passions and “calm passions.” Passions and compassion were problematic words, for thinkers in different fields, both medical and philosophical, used these labels variably. Passions, for Cheyne, have a positive meaning, for they facilitate the motion of the solids, as any action and motion nourish and increase the power of contraction, a “Spring” and “Elasticity” in animal solids (*EM* 178). Passions, he believed, have a “wonderful effect” on “the Pulse, Circulation, Perspiration, and Secretions, and the other Animal Function, in Nervous Cases especially” (*EM* 68). For Hume, however, passions are both benign and malignant. What he calls “direct passions” or “desire” are characterised as those which “arise from a natural impulse and instinct which is perfectly unaccountable, e.g. desire of punishment to enemies and happiness to friends, hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites” (*HN* 439). Calm passions, he explains, are those which have “become a settled principle of action” but should not be “confounded with reason” (*HN* 417). This latter type of passion also signifies “general appetite to good and aversion to evil,” which suggests that the moral order, as Hume states, “depends on the ordinary course of our passions and actions” (*HN* 532). In other words, the impulsive urge to practise good deeds is considered to be prompted by passions in the same manner as experiencing hunger.

This immediately conjures up La Mettrie's effort to take away the distinction between man and animals in assessing moral capacity. He argues that animals possess souls resembling those of human beings, which "feel repugnance at the sight of a fellow creature being torn to pieces" (*MM* 18, 19). Though a degree of sentimentalism is injected into his assessment, this view about the moral capacity of an animal to feel was shared by some important philosophers in the eighteenth century, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau in France and William Smellie⁵⁵ in Britain. Celebrating the state of nature as the soil for strengthening the "force of natural pity," Rousseau has argued that "pity becomes all the more intense as the perceiving animal identifies itself more intimately with the suffering animal."⁵⁶

This sharply contrasts with Reid's argument that the moral foundation is established in the second stage of life after the rational capacity is acquired. Sensibility's edifying powers such as inspiring moral virtues and love, Hume believed, could explain why human beings are naturally benevolent. For him, therefore, sensibility has a profound bearing upon moral development. That moral foundation is already there from birth has a strong resemblance to "mechanistic" thinking. What Hume has called calm passions are, in Hartley's terminology, "Good-will, or Benevolence." Hartley defines it as "that pleasing Affection which engages us to promote the Welfare of others to the best of our Power" (*OM* i 473). Godwin also believes that man's natural disposition is benevolent,⁵⁷ and this may well be explained

⁵⁵ See William Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History* (Edinburgh, 1790). Hereafter cited as *Natural History* with page numbers in parentheses.

⁵⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality* trans. Maurice Cranston (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), pp.100,101. Hereafter cited as *Discourse* with page numbers in parentheses.

⁵⁷ Benevolence was taught in educational institutions and popularized in literature. See Chris Jones's *Radical Sensibility*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p.8.

by this associationist approach that moral good has its source in natural sentiment. Although there is a degree of scepticism about “instinct” or “inbred sentiment” in Wollstonecraft’s writing which reminds us of Reid’s rationalist argument, in her fictions (particularly in *Mary*) she too endorses “warmth” of sensibility as a sign of benevolence.

In the nineteenth century, many more medical treatises and their criticisms emerged which scrutinised the workings of the mind from a physiological point of view, the culmination of which was Charles Bell’s *Idea of a New Anatomy of the Brain* (1811).⁵⁸ The shift from the nerve to the brain structure therefore took place in the early nineteenth century. By the time Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley were pursuing their writing career, some literature had appeared which denigrated such a biomedical stance attributing philosophical or even moral capacity to bodily “organs.” *Headlong Hall* (1816) by Thomas Peacock, a friend of the Shelleys, parodied the trend by making Mr Cranium, a phrenologist, say “A man in whom the organ of benevolence is not developed, cannot be benevolent.”⁵⁹ This clearly shows how widely prevalent this notion of the “organs” was in Shelley’s time. The rationalist theory of Wollstonecraft and Godwin was predicated upon the enlightenment belief in the power of education. Wollstonecraft in particular wanted to reject the uniqueness of the individual organism, for what made women’s liberation possible for her was their ability to improve both in mind and body. A belief that negates the power of education, and assigns man’s moral

⁵⁸ I will not explicate the work, but merely mention that various historians of medicine such as Ludmilla Jordanova and Karl Figlio have acknowledged the importance of his work as showing an insight into the nature of brain structure and function, the relationship between the psychological and the physiological, and the nervous system. See Ludmilla Jordanova’s “The Art and Science of Seeing in Medicine: Physiognomy 1780-1820” in *Medicine and the Five Senses* eds. W.F.Bynum and Roy Porter. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

and intellectual capacity to “organs” would have been a reprehensible idea to her.

Francois-Joseph Gall and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim also made a direct link between the “organs” and moral goodness or intelligence in man, which has a certain echo from La Mettrie’s theory. Like La Mettrie, Gall and Spurzheim apply this materialist theory of the human mind to animals, as the latter states, “The mild and good-natured animals, then, have the place of their forehead corresponding to the organ of goodness in man elevated and prominent, while the ill-natured present a hollow.”⁶⁰ They reject the notion that education is a cause of the faculties of the mind. Spurzheim argues that the extreme view which applies the Lockean theory that “the minds not only of men but also of animals are born without determinate faculties—indifferent—as tabula rasa or blank paper” is unacceptable (*Outlines* 265). His rationale behind this is that, “if education could produce faculties, why have instructors not yet found the means of conferring understanding judgment and good qualities in general? Why are we not all men of genius!” (*Outlines* 269). According to their system, organs or “faculties” rather than the process of education explain certain propensities of human beings.

Whytt and Cullen vaguely associate strong hysterical fits or passion with women, but Gall and Spurzheim argue that they are directly attributable to the “cerebellum.” Spurzheim, for instance, records a case of a widow who was subject to very strong hysterical fits. Being physician to this woman, as Spurzheim writes, Gall considered this “passion” as relating to the development of the cerebellum (*Outlines* 106). Going over numerous organs that cause peculiar propensities of the human mind

⁵⁹ See Thomas Peacock. *Headlong Hall* (Wordsworth Classics), p.25.

⁶⁰ J.G.Spurzheim, M.D. *Outlines of the Physiognomical System or Drs. Galls and Spurzheim: indicating the Dispositions and Manifestations of the Mind* (London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1815), p.161. Hereafter cited as *Outlines* with page numbers in parenetheses.

such as “amativeness,” “philoprogenitiveness,” “destructiveness,” “individuality” and “wit,” Spurzheim draws a conclusion that “as it is really possible to demonstrate the respective organs of the propensities, sentiments and intellectual faculties, it is impossible to deny that their manifestations depend on the organization” (*Outlines* 259).

4. Materialism and Immaterialism

The body functions as the sign of various functions: the body as a moral and intellectual agent, the body as the source of passions, the body as the mechanism which registers various impressions (or stimuli) and so forth. The question however remains as to the ultimate cause of a life-force. As I have discussed, the whole dispute between Whytt and Haller led us to question whether “irritability,” the organ’s specific motion, is characteristic of matter, or of a life-force.⁶¹ While Haller “thinks irritability an innate property of muscular fibres,” contending that it “does not depend upon the nerves and has no connexion with sensibility” (*PE* 148), Whytt believes that matter itself is incapable of sensation or thought. Hartley’s theory follows Haller’s materialism, which is unlike Whytt’s in that it argues for the “efficiency of corporeal causes upon the medullary substance.” Hartley states,

. . . it seems to me, that the powers of generating ideas, and raising them by association, must also arise from corporeal causes, and consequently admit of an explication from the subtle influences of the small parts of matter upon each other, as soon as these are sufficiently understood, which is farther evinced from the manifest influences of material causes upon our ideas and associations, taken notice of under the second proposition. (*OM* i 72)

⁶¹ R.K.French, (1969), p.70.

This comparison between Hartley and Whytt shows that the former is closer to Haller's materialism which endows the activating power to matter.⁶² However it is curious to observe that Hartley's causality principle also splits into two. On the one hand he assigns the soul to matter (*OM* i 34), and on the other attributes the cause of this mechanical impulse or pressure to "the immediate agency of the Deity" (*OM* ii 20). It was perhaps this uncertainty that made the image of self not just decentred but also unstable and insecure.

Not only did this way of thinking make the locus of accountability impossible to determine, it also provoked the theological discourse. The mechanical philosophy that had arisen in the early eighteenth century, Lester King declares, seemed too close to materialism for those with religious beliefs, which drew natural philosophers' attention to religious issues: "Matter in motion could very well explain the material world, but what about the world of spirit, the realm of the immaterial?"⁶³ In response to this general inquiry, what seems to be happening in the medical documents published in the eighteenth century is that "spirit had been brought back into physics and into physiology."⁶⁴

George Cheyne's religious commitment also came into direct conflict with his own scientific study of the human body. He tried to reconcile his religious inclination with his mechanical ideas by retaining the source of celestial motion. Materialistic though his nerve theory seems, the agent of communication was left ambiguous by his

⁶² Haller's religious piety did not allow the "soul" to be as material as that of La Mettrie, so the former still attached a sacred meaning to it.

⁶³ Lester King, "George Cheyne, Mirror of Eighteenth Century Medicine" in *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 48 (1974), p.519.

⁶⁴ Roy Porter, "The Eighteenth Century" in *The Western Medical Tradition 800 BC to AD 1800* Eds. L.I. Conrad, M. Neve, V. Nutton, R. Porter, and A. Wear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.358.

notion of the “animal spirits” that are neither spiritual nor substantial. What actuated and governed the operations of such a mechanism, Cheyne maintains, were “spiritual Substances” (*EM* 94). He rejects the idea that the “animal spirits” are the fluids existing in “our System” (*EM* 81) meaning the “material System of Fluids” (*EM* 85) such as light or water, and he further suggests that there are “some other more aetherial and subtil Fluid[s]” (*EM* 85) that may be “Intermediates between pure, immaterial Spirit and gross Matter” and “Cement between the human Soul and Body” (*EM* 87). Hence there seems to be eclecticism between materialism and religious belief to some extent in Cheyne’s description of the body. Ultimately he argues that the power to “produce *Elasticity* and *Attraction*, or allow Particles of Matter” is “impress’d with these Qualities in their Creation immediately by the *supreme Being*” (*English Malady* 86). He retains his religious belief in the existence of an external agent by calling it the “sentient Principle” (*EM* 88) or “Free-willing Principle” (*EM* 91). In his *Philosophic Principles of Religion* (1705), he underlines the importance of the “First Cause of all things”⁶⁵ as “an original impress” which was “impressed on matter by the Creator of the world” (*PP* 41), thereby stressing the passivity of matter.

This controversy seems to have no end. In the late eighteenth century, the soul was commonly understood as an immaterial and immortal substance. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1771) for example states

That the soul is an immaterial substance appears from hence, that its primary operations of willing and thinking have not only no connection with the known properties of body, but seem plainly inconsistent with some of its most

⁶⁵ George Cheyne, *Philosophical Principles of Religion, Natural and Reveal’d*, Part I. 2nd ed. (London: Strahan, 1715), p.44. Hereafter cited as *PP* with page numbers in parentheses.

essential qualities.⁶⁶

It was assumed that the soul, being an immaterial agent, does not depend on the body for its existence, and therefore it “must exist after the dissolution of the body, unless annihilated by the same power which gave it a being at first.”⁶⁷

Religious controversy over the im/materiality of the soul may be best illustrated by Priestley’s philosophical work *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirits* (1777) published by Joseph Johnson. He rejects Andrew Baxter’s dualistic idea that the soul is superadded to the material body. The Unitarians, of whom Priestley was one of the leaders, saw themselves as “rational dissenters” who had stripped away superstitious accretions and left only the essentials.⁶⁸ While Cheyne reverts back to the notion of the immaterial power, Priestley’s rigorous materialism does not leave any room for this dualism. It is based on the idea that the matter and power are compatible, for the power of attraction or repulsion is necessary to its very being. Priestley inveighs against the supposition that there are “two distinct kinds of substance in human nature, . . . matter and spirit, or mind.”⁶⁹ For him, the solidity of matter is merely superficial, for it is the power of “mutual attraction” (*Disquisitions* 5) that ensures the existence even of an atom: “Take away the power, therefore, and the solidity of the atom intirely disappears. In short, it is then no longer matter” (*Disquisitions* 6).

Darwin, who frequently exchanged ideas with Priestley, shared the same premise. He is also critical of some philosophers who “have divided all created beings

⁶⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica; or a Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* vol.3 (Edinburgh: Bell and Macfarquha, 1771), p.618.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ William St Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family*. (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), p.34.

⁶⁹ Joseph Priestley, *Disquisitions relating to Matter and Spirit*. (London: Joseph Johnson, 1777), p.xxxvii. Hereafter cited as *Disquisitions* with page numbers in

into material [which obeys the mechanic laws of action and reaction; but which can begin no motion of itself] and immaterial [the cause of all motion, and is either termed the power of gravity, of specific attraction, or the spirit of animation] (*Zoonomia* i 108-109). This is expressive of his scepticism towards spiritualism. He argues that “the spirit of animation at the time it communicates or receives motion from solid bodies,” must itself possess the same property, namely solidity, if it were to influence or to be influenced (*Zoonomia* i 115). Focusing on the intricate internal movement which could be observed during the dissection of the corpse was characteristic of early nineteenth-century medical theory. However, Darwin could be considered as half way towards that stage, for he still draws on the method of “analogy” by which he compares organic contractibility to the power of attraction or electricity.⁷⁰ Darwin had two primary textual antecedents, not just medical but scientific. By consulting available signs from natural sciences such as astronomy, geology and physics, while keeping in mind the resonating pattern of natural phenomena, he could sketch a picture of the body’s internal order and balance.

Darwin’s theory of contractibility is reminiscent of Haller’s theory of muscular contraction and the irritable fibres of the body, but Darwin’s medical approach owes most to John Brown’s theory or “Brunonianism,”⁷¹ as he explains in his medical treatise:

The coincidence of some parts of [*Zoonomia*] with correspondent deductions in

parentheses.

⁷⁰ Both Darwin and Cullen are said to have used electricity to cure nervous diseases. Cullen, for example, states that “[e]lectricity . . . is certainly one of the most powerful stimulants that can be employed to act upon the nervous system of animals” (*FL* iii 191).

⁷¹ W.F.Bynum and Roy Porter, *Brunonianism in Britain and Europe* (London: Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, 1988).

the Brunonian *Elemanta Medicina*, a work (with some exceptions) of great genius, must be considered as confirmations of the truth of the theory, as they were probably arrived at by different trains of reasoning (*Zoonmia* i 75).

His medical vocabulary thus heavily relies on John Brown's notion of "excitability," which is elaborated in his chapter "Of Stimulus and Exertion." The notion of "excitability" was common knowledge for eighteenth-century medical men, and was considered as a vital concept for understanding the nature of life. Without this idea, Galvanism, reanimating bodily parts with electrical stimulus, was perhaps difficult to accept.

Following the earlier medical thinkers, Brown unites physical and mental motion into the movement of the nerves, as he argues, "the exciting powers will immediately rouse into exertion any of the functions that distinguish living animal systems; or, in other words, produce sense, motion, thought or passion" (*Elements* Part I 36). Calling these exciting powers "the true cause of life" (*Elements* Part I 14), he thus equates the cause of emotions and ideas with life spirits. As Thomas Morrison, Member of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, has said in his *Examination into the principles of what is commonly called the Brunonian system* (1806), "I shall therefore wish the words Excitability, Vital Principle of Life to be considered synonymous [sic]."⁷² As the saying goes "the more a spark is blown, the brighter it burns, and the sooner it is spent." Excitability is exhausted by any passion or perturbation, and such a state of body suggests a certain vulnerability. Darwin also equates that which gives new life with "ethereal fires" (*TN* Canto II, p.44, l.13). Xavier Bichat, a French physician,

⁷² Thomas Morrison, *An examination into the principles of what is commonly called the Brunonian System* (London: Highley, 1806), pp.14,15.

presupposes that the “vital powers” are divided into two orders, animal and organic, and if either of them is extinguished by age or excess of stimuli, both will cease to function.⁷³ So long as the ethereal fire is not extinguished, Brunonians tended to believe that life continued. Wollstonecraft was also concerned about the question, what gives materials life and heat: she asks herself whether it is “fluids” or “a liquid fire” that is the cause of life (*VRW* 185). But it is Mary Shelley, in her formidable work, *Frankenstein*, who directly treats the issue of life.

Brown had designated life not only as a principle, but as the varying effect of stimuli on that principle. In terms of life energy, excitability affects one’s physical condition. If “expenditure” of the spirit of animation is too great or too little, consequently rendering the sensorial power “above or beneath the natural quantity,” it becomes a disease, and when the spirit is used up, living fibres no longer contract. Darwin had also put forward Brunonian ideas in verse.

How short the span of LIFE! Some hours possess’d,

Warm but to cool, and active but to rest!—

The age-worn fibres goaded to contract,

By repetition palsied, cease to act;

When Time’s cold hands the languid senses seize,

Chill the dull nerves, the lingering currents freeze;

Organic matter, unreclaim’d by Life,

Reverts to elements by chemic strife. (*TN* Canto II, pp.43, 44, ll.1-8)

⁷³ Xavier Bichat, *Physiological Researches Upon Life and Death* trans. Tobias Watkins (Philadelphia: Smith & Maxwell, 1809), p.131. Hereafter cited as *PR* with page numbers in parentheses. Like Haller, his theory pivots on the notion of organic contractibility as the general character of all the living parts, which “belong[s] to the organ, and is inherent in it,” therefore has an emphasis on the ever-changing organic

Thus the organic matter and chemical workings are nicely harmonised in his theory. In his medical treatise, he argues that when the sensorial power or the spirit is withdrawn as in death, “[the bodies] possess no power of motion at all” (*Zoonomia* i 72). Yet death is no terminal for Darwin, for the organic matter, “unreclaimed” by life or the “spirits,” transmutes back to chemical elements. The spirits become something more than an agent that is part of matter, for they can be conveniently extracted or put back into the body like electricity. The life principle for Darwin is therefore still “analogous” to things that can be explained by the scientific laws of nature. Darwin’s critical comments on Christianity are difficult to fathom, for he tends to evade a serious discussion on religion and the role of God in the creation of life. However his belief in the divine creation of Nature is not totally denied. Darwin’s annotation in *The Temple of Nature* affirms the existence of the Deity, as “THE FIRST CAUSE” and calls “Young Nature” the “child of God” (*TN* Canto I, p.19, ll.223-226). He is “ready to allow, that the powers of gravity, specific attraction, electricity, magnetism, and even the spirit of animation, may consist of matter of a finer kind, and to believe; with St.Paul and Malbranch, that the ultimate cause only of all motion is immaterial, that is God” (*Zoonomia* i 115).

William Lawrence’s materialism is illuminating when it is compared to Darwin’s hesitation or ambivalence in defining the “powers” of life. Lawrence forthrightly rejects equating the life principle to the operation of physical sciences.

Now, although certain parts of the animal economy obey the laws of mechanics, and others admit of illustration by the aid of chemistry, and thus far the living processes come within the domain of the physical sciences, the main springs of the animal functions, the original moving forces, cannot be

movement (*PR* 166).

explained on these grounds. The powers of sensation and contraction, and the properties of the capillary vessels, belong peculiarly and exclusively to living organic textures: they are eminently vital, and form the distinguishing character of living beings.⁷⁴

While Darwin still largely relies on scientific analogies which are elaborated further in his verse writings, Lawrence considers organic beings as possessing properties which cannot be fully explained by the laws of mechanics or chemistry.⁷⁵ Generally speaking, the vital theory of Darwin, Bichat and Lawrence is based on the activities and contractibility of nervous and muscular fibers, thereby foregrounding the organic nature of the body. Lawrence describes the intricacy of the operations of organic bodies in the following passage:

[the ablest geometricians] acknowledge that the springs of the animal frame are too numerous, too intricate, and too imperfectly known, to be submitted, with any prospect of advantage, to calculation; that, in such complicated operations, experience is our only safe guide, and inductions from numerous facts the only sure support of our reasonings. (*Lectures* 72, 3)

This part of his theory is of great interest to us in that he uses the word “spring” and in a plural form. It is highly debatable whether the word designates the spring which

⁷⁴ William Lawrence, *Lectures on Physiology, Zoology, and the Natural History of Man*. (London: Callow, 1819), p.78. Hereafter cited as *Lectures* with page numbers in parentheses.

⁷⁵ John Gregory also maintains that the phenomena of the world are not all explicable in terms of attracting and repelling powers of ultimate particles. He states that “in the vegetable and animal kingdom there are evident indications of powers of a different nature from those of unorganized bodies.” He concludes that certain effects produced cannot be explained by the “laws of matter.” See John Gregory’s *Lectures on the Duties and Qualifications of a Physician* 1770. Quoted by Philip C. Titterbush, *Overtures to Biology: the Speculations of Eighteenth-Century Naturalists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p.187.

signifies a metal part that has a springy motion, or the source of water which figures the life principle. But this word is perhaps evocative of both, for the meaning of machinery parts is a relic of the mechanistic approach, and when it represents the “source,” this passage will suggest the multiple sources of action, reverberating with Whytt’s musical metaphor. However, Lawrence, like Darwin, uses the term “spirit” to describe this life principle, indirectly suggesting a supernatural quality that cannot be explained by science.

The immaterial system seems to have been still predominant in Mary Shelley’s time. In 1814, a commentator in the *Monthly Magazine* talks of John Hunter’s life principle in the following manner.

I proceed to inquire into Mr Hunter’s opinion, that irritability is the effect of some subtle, mobile, invisible substance, superadded to the evident structure of muscles, or other forms of vegetable and animal matter as magnetism is to iron, and as electricity is to various substances with which it may be connected.⁷⁶

The commentator is indirectly critiquing the materialist stance of granting “irritability” the status of agency. He is favourable towards Hunter’s notion that invisible substance is “superadded” to the body, and believes “most persons do think” that “in magnetic and electric motions, a subtle invisible substance, of a very quickly and powerfully mobile nature, puts in motion other bodies which are evident to the senses, and are of a nature more gross and inert” (ibid).

John Abernethy and Hunter’s theory of vitalism is extensively elaborated in *The Quarterly Review* (1820),⁷⁷ and its commentator censures William Lawrence’s

⁷⁶ *Monthly Magazine* Vol.XXXVIII. (1814), p.50.

⁷⁷ See Appendix C, “The Quarterly Review” vol. XXII (1820) in *Frankenstein*. The 1818 Text. Ed. Marilyn Butler (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1993), pp.231-251.

materialism by also referring to Mr Rennell who states “an immaterial and immortal soul is added to the living principle which he possesses in common with other animals.”⁷⁸ Therefore, as Marilyn Butler has noted, Abernethy, Lawrence’s former tutor, who inherited the powerfully theological culture of Edinburgh collided with Lawrence on the subject of materialism. While Abernethy had faithfully followed the teaching of John Hunter and his well-known “life-principle,”⁷⁹ Lawrence was sceptical of his immaterial system just as Priestley had rejected Baxter’s. Lawrence’s medical thinking is particularly relevant to my study, for he was an acquaintance of Mary Shelley, a physician of Percy treating his “continual irritation” in August 1815.⁸⁰

I have tried to follow the development in eighteenth-century medical discourse, and the recurrent philosophical themes of Godwin, Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley which seem to weigh heavily in their works. These three writers were deeply concerned with the issues of the life principle, moral development and how one’s talent is determined. The central question is whether the well-functioning mind starts with actual material that is set before birth, or whether it is subject to a good deal of further modification under the influence of climate, education, temperament and sex. I also wanted to show that rationalism is not merely a political concern, but is the object of philosophical and medical inquiry. In the following chapters, I will use medical ideas to explain some aspects of the writings of the Godwin circle. These will include Godwin’s irresoluteness in regard to rationalism, Wollstonecraft’s attempt to overcome the sex barrier, and Mary

⁷⁸ See Appendix C, Marilyn Butler (1993), p.238.

⁷⁹ See John Abernethy, *An Enquiry into the Probability and Rationality of Mr Hunter’s ‘Theory of Life’* (London: Longman, etc., 1814), p.48. Hereafter cited as *Mr Hunter’s Theory* with page numbers in parentheses.

⁸⁰ Hugh J. Luke, Jr., “Sir William Lawrence: Physician to Shelley and Mary” in *Papers*

Shelley's manifest materialism. My aim, of course, is not just to show whether Shelley was a materialist, but also to demonstrate the complexity of scientific, medical, religious and moral discourses within which she was writing her novel, and to find a crucial link with her parents' works.

2

'The Chain of the Body'
in William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*

Sound reasoning and truth, when adequately communicated must always be victorious over error. Sound reasoning and truth are capable of being so communicated: Truth is omnipotent. The vices and moral weakness of man are not invincible: Man is perfectible, or in other words susceptible of perpetual improvement." (*PJ* 140)

As is observable from reading both *Political Justice* (1793)⁸¹ and *Caleb Williams* (1794), Godwin is preoccupied with political and moral questions through which he explores the nature of justice and truth. Godwin gives truth the epithets of "omnipotent" and "immutable" (*PJ* 117), but on the other hand "truth" also depends on the addresser's ability to procure a secure conduit or means of "communication." He upholds the human capacity to reason, and vindicates it as the condition for successful communication: "... if the communicator be sufficiently master of his subject, and if the truth be altogether on his side, he must ultimately succeed in his undertaking Man is a rational being It is absurd therefore to say that sound reasoning and truth

⁸¹ William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness* Third Edition ed. Isaac Kramnick (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1976). Hereafter cited as *PJ* with page numbers. The first edition came out in 1793 and had been hastily delivered for publication. Godwin then made a number of changes in the second (1796) and third (1798) editions to render the text more "unified and coherent." (See Isaac Kramnick *A Note of the Text of Political Justice* p.57). All the quotations are from the third edition text unless stated specifically as *PJi*. *PJi* stands for *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) ed. Mark Philp (London: William Pickering, 1993).

cannot be communicated by one man to another” (*PJ* 141).

Straightforward though this may seem, Godwin’s rationalism is problematic, particularly when we try to assess the various editions of *Political Justice* and the earlier and later novels. Many critics believe that his rationalistic ideas are somewhat modified in the second and third editions or in his later writings. It is said that in the first edition of *Political Justice* Godwin’s anarchism or his scepticism concerning the governing body of the state is “premissed on the belief that reason can become the sole determinant of human action,”⁸² whereas in the second edition he gives more importance to the role of feeling and sentiment.⁸³ Can we draw a distinction between the first and the second editions of 1793 and 1796, and does the change takes place before he reads David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) in 1795.⁸⁴ Pamela Clemit traces Godwin’s emphasis on sympathy and feeling back to *Caleb Williams*,⁸⁵ his first serious novel, stating that its *denouement* indicates that Godwin had already recognised the inadequacy of his faith in human reason.⁸⁶ Clemit’s point is a valid one, because the novel deals with the problem of truth-claims and whether truth is “communicable” or not, and it also explores the epistemological question of how this can be realised. One of the crucial metaphors of Godwin in alluding to such communication is that of a “chain” which inevitably trails the motive and intention of

⁸² Pamela Clemit, *St. Leon* (1799) (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1994), p.xiv.

⁸³ Isaac Kramnick, A Note on the text of *Political Justice* (1976), p.57.

⁸⁴ Paul Hamilton makes a special note of Godwin’s reading of Hume’s *Treatise* in 1795 which feeds into Godwin’s tendency of “reinstat[ing] ‘feeling’ as the prime mover of human action, and reserves the purely rational act as at best an ideal or limiting case.” See Paul Hamilton, ‘Coleridge and Godwin in the 1790s’ in *The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland* ed. R.Gravil and M.Lefebure (London: Macmillan, 1990), p.44.

⁸⁵ William Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (1794) ed. David McCacken (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Hereafter cited as *CW* with page numbers in parentheses.

⁸⁶ See Pamela Clemit (1994), p.xiv.

one's action. He therefore endorses moral conduct based on "virtuous" motives, but at the same time, drawing upon the philosophy of Shaftesbury and Hume, he underscores the role of "feeling" in "self-love and benevolence" (*PJ* 377).

Godwin's own justification of his inconsistency is given in the Preface to his second novel, *St. Leon* (1799). He notices the difference, for example, between this novel in which there are "the affections and charities of private life" everywhere and "the Enquiry concerning Political Justice [in which] they seemed to be treated with no great degree of indulgence and favour."⁸⁷ To defend himself against a possible accusation of admitting that he has changed his mind, he writes:

. . . all I think it necessary to say on the present occasion is, that, for more than four years, I have been anxious for opportunity and leisure to modify some of the earlier chapters of that work [*Political Justice*] in conformity to the sentiments inculcated in this.⁸⁸

Hence as Godwin claims, though in retrospect, we may suspect he had intended to insert his "sentiments" concerning domestic affections in his *Political Justice* at a much earlier phase, possibly during or after his composition of *Caleb Williams*.

It is more clearly articulated in the later editions of *Political Justice* that Godwin's rationalist views underwent a visible change after reading Hume. The Humean rejection of the confrontation between reason and passion⁸⁹ reverberates in

⁸⁷ See William Godwin *St. Leon* (1799) (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1994), pp. xxxiii, xxxiv.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ David Hume defines the term passion as "an original existence, or, . . . modification of existence" or a human being's original state (*HN* 415). He calls into question the "suppos'd pre-eminence of reason above passion," so suggesting the fallacy of the philosophy that believes in "the blindness, unconstancy, and deceitfulness" of passion (*HN* 413). Shaftesbury's optimistic notion of innate goodness is implicit in Hume's notion of passion in that Hume suggests that what he calls "calm passions or desires" are either certain instincts originally implanted in our natures, such as benevolence

Godwin's evasion of the paradigm opposition of reason and passion: "passion is so far from incompatible with reason that it is inseparable from it" (*PJ* 136, 137).⁹⁰ Sensibility and passion are a key to understanding Godwin's truth-claims, because his theory is based on the rational operation of the mind which cannot do without the faculty of sensation (*PJ* 145), as he writes, "the human mind, so far as we are acquainted with it, is nothing else but a faculty of perception" (*PJ* 146). Thus he gives a due weight to human sensibility.

In this chapter I will discuss Godwin's seemingly ambivalent notion of reason by investigating the impact that eighteenth-century nerve theory and Hartley's associationism had on his mode of thought, which notably accounts for his indeterminate rationalism. By closely reading his *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*, I will attempt to show how Godwin's works took on the changing symbolism of the body in the eighteenth century, and I will analyse Godwin's intellectual system which exalts a certain kind of passion and sensibility that can co-exist with his rationalism.⁹¹

1. Passion and the Body

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "passion" as "an affection of the mind; any kind

and resentment [towards evil acts], the love of life, and kindness to children; or the general appetite to good, and aversion to evil . . ." (*HN* 417).

⁹⁰ This citation is from the chapter on 'Voluntary Actions of Men Originate in their Opinion' of the third edition, and this chapter is not part of the first edition, and from this, we may speculate that much of his discussion on the interdependent relation between reason and passion was developed after reading Hume.

⁹¹ Burton Ralph Pollin argues that this is observed in both his novels and *Political Justice*, as he writes, "It is not true . . . that his novels represents a break with the rationalism of *Political Justice*; there is no real irreconcilability between the intellectualism of his system and the sentimentalism of his fiction" (p.220). Pollin notes, as Clement does, that after the publication of *Caleb Williams* and his marriage, with his increased stress upon feeling, Godwin inclines more and more to the current practices of his day in using the language and the character type of sensibility (p.221).

of feeling by which the mind is powerfully affected or moved; a vehement, commanding, or overpowering emotion",⁹² suggesting a meaning which represents an operation that is both passive and active, involuntary and voluntary, which in fact embodies the Godwinian oxymoron. There are two underlying strands of discourse in the eighteenth century which significantly explain the ambivalent features of the definition. The first is a particular medical discourse which treated the nerve system as the principal mechanism of the body. The second is the philosophical argument which vindicates the innate benevolence or moral goodness of the human being.

One of the most salient features of eighteenth-century medical science which in great part accounts for Godwinian passion is a move away from the Cartesian dualism of the body and mind as I have outlined in the introductory chapter.⁹³ In medical discourse the conceptual "soul" which had previously been endowed with a more spiritual and divine quality began to take on the role of involuntary operations of the body, as we saw in the first chapter. In other words, the word "soul" was losing its ground in "head" or "mind" and was increasingly liquidated and dispersed in various solid parts of the body like organs or fibres, and consequently became more material. In the eighteenth century, the figurative body came to epitomize the site of accumulative impressions, making sensibility or passions stand for the instantaneous bodily as well as

⁹² The entries for the term passions (plural form) include Shakespeare's *Henry VI* (1591), and Mrs. Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791).

⁹³ G.S. Rousseau, (1969), p.120. See also Christopher Lawrence, (1979), pp.24-5. Dorinda Outram studies French medical science of the eighteenth-century and finds that the prevailing idea about the functional integrity of the bodily organism can be considered a "movement away from the last vestiges of Cartesian dualism." See *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political Culture*. (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1989), p.49. There are confusion between the words, the "soul" and the "mind," because the conceptual soul was more and more becoming associated with the nervous system which is embedded in matter or the body mechanism, which leaves the mind to carry out rational or conscious operations of the brain.

emotional responses of an individual to external influences. In the sensationalist psychology of Cheyne, Whytt, Cullen and Brown, the body by implication is not only free to perceive or feel the impressions of both the external world and the internal affections, but also left susceptible and vulnerable to them, and this is where the paradox arises. The close tie between the faculty of reason and that of sensation is everywhere observed in Godwin's *Political Justice*. Despite his privileging of reason over sensation, his philosophical problem remains unresolved as his statement illustrates: "Though mind be a real and proper antecedent, it is in no case a first cause" (*PJ* 376).

The physicality of the soul undermines the claims to rationality or the conscious will. When human action is instantaneous or immediate, leaving the natural state of the body to act with minimum intervention of the mind, the locus or the agency of moral judgement becomes obscure. The moral ramifications of the "instantaneous impulse" or sensibility frequently involved the question of whether the human being is innately selfish or benevolent. The question here is whether the prime mover of human action is reason or sensation. Godwin seems to have been concerned with this issue before he wrote *Caleb Williams* (*PJ* i 190).⁹⁴ To consider the moral judgement which the bodily impulses make is equivalent to asking 'what status is given to the "natural" state of body or what Shaftesbury calls "Nature"?'⁹⁵ Depending upon the status of

⁹⁴ Already in the first edition of *Political Justice* he takes issue with "the advocates of self-love" who characterise human action in terms of one's selfish considerations. He presents a case in which an infant experiences for the first time the benevolent emotion towards his nurse who has broken her leg. He asks whether it is possible for anyone to conceive that the child "in the instantaneous impulse of sympathy" is guided by selfish considerations such as the inconvenience on his part of doing without her. His answer is clearly in the negative, taking "the pleasures of benevolence" (*PJ* i 190) as a matter of fact, because for him, "if self love be the only principle of action, there can be no such thing as virtue" (*PJ* i 193).

⁹⁵ Shaftesbury believed in man's "natural" social sentiments which fostered mutual

Nature or the body, that is whether human beings are innately benevolent or self-interested, the affection of the mind or passion is assessed differently.

David Hume's notion of "calm passion," distinguishing it from the commonly understood notion of passion(s)—meaning "a violent and sensible emotion causing disorder in the temper" (*HN* 437), bears the positive features of benevolence and the love of life. Godwin's endorsement of "purified" passion seems to share the same characteristic. The sensitivity to the word "passion" manifests these philosophers' challenge to the existing perjorative connotation. When this use of the word is set over against that in medical discourse, it seems at once clear that Godwin, like Hume, interrogates the nature of the body which is potentially incorrigible: 'Does the body "chain" or "is chained by" the mind, through the mechanism of nerves or what Whytt has termed the sympathetic chord that "vibrates?"'

In the same vein Godwin's treatment of the term "sensibility" is pivotal in that his interest in human sensibility exemplifies two contradictory operations: one evokes a vulnerable position, but the other signifies a positive feature of human capacity to accumulate knowledge. Sensibility, or the inlet of knowledge through the senses, is inseparable from his enlightenment approach to knowledge. There is a strong trace of the Lockean rejection of the innate principles of knowledge in his writings,⁹⁶ and this, together with Hartley's doctrine of association, gives ample reason for Godwin to study the accumulative impressions or impulses received in the mind, and hence for him to

affections and sympathy amongst each other. He subverts the meaning of "natural" by professing that the affections and care towards others and the involvement in society are natural, thereby naturalising the human preference for the social state over a desolate and wild state of nature: "society must be . . . natural to him." See *Characteristics or Men, Manner, Opinions, Times* ed. John M. Robertson vol.2. (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1963), p.83. Hereafter cited as *Characteristics* with page numbers in parentheses.

encourage the diffusion of education and a concern for external influences.

There is an example from Godwin's *Caleb Williams* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* under the word "sensibility." This is taken from Mr. Falkland's speech in his murder trial, where he shows his strong regard for honour and reputation: "My life has been spent in the keenest and most unintermitted sensibility to reputation" (*CW* 101). Its reference is under the denotation of "Quickness and acuteness of apprehension or feeling; the quality of being easily and strongly affected by emotional influences; sensitiveness" (5.a., *OED*).⁹⁷ The quotation is not only semantically pertinent but contextually suited in that the Godwinian attack on the culture of sentimentalism⁹⁸ is here most acutely observed.⁹⁹ Mr. Falkland's posture is suggestive of that of a man of feeling, whose acute sensitivity to a series of impressions from the external world potentially renders him vulnerable. Godwin's preoccupation with the portraiture of the sensitive man may partially be explained by his interest in the human mind and its

⁹⁶ According to Godwin, "All human knowledge is the result of perception" (*PJ* 338).

⁹⁷ Besides this definition, *Oxford English Dictionary* offers others such as the "Power or faculty of feeling, capacity of sensation and emotion as distinguished from cognition and will" (1.b.) "Mental perception, awareness of something (3). "Emotional consciousness; glad or sorrowful, grateful or resentful recognition of a person's conduct, or of a fact or a condition of things" (4.a.).

⁹⁸ Chris Jones, in his incisive essay, categorises Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft as the writers of radical Sensibility, whose stance, he maintains, is "principally distinguished by their criticism of conservative Sensibility." Conservative sensibility, he says, "leads to the affirmations of Burke that all our feelings are formed by the habitual associations of the status quo," and the susceptibility of a typical man of feeling, Harley, can only cause him to wear himself out reacting against a world, and cannot change it. See Chris Jones, (1993), pp.72-76.

⁹⁹ G.A.Starr, while acknowledging a subversive potential in of the feeling or sensibility of an individual to renounce the customary rules of conduct and belief, points out the conservatism of sentimental literature such as Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*, Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and Berinardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul and Virginia*. In them, he argues, the fate of the sentimental characters become "an emblem of the ultimate stability and inescapability of the status quo." See 'Sentimental Novels of the Later Eighteenth Century' in *The Columbia History of the British Novel* ed. John Richetti (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), pp.193, 194.

relation with nerves.

David Hartley's *Observations on Man*, which greatly influenced Godwin's theory of man's perfectibility, helped generalise the nerve theory by extending the issue from Newtonian vibration to a concern for ethics and religion. Just as Richardson's delineation of his sentimental characters is informed by his reading of Cheyne's *The English Malady*, so Godwin's similarly sensitive heroes could not have been sustained without Hartley's famous treatise.¹⁰⁰ Godwin's belief in a more robust and strenuous mind is incompatible with the ideal of these heroes, and our investigation into his theoretical framework elaborated in *Political Justice* and its application in *Caleb Williams* will enable us better to document his equivocal imagery of the operation of the mind and the metaphor of the chain.

2. Sensibility and *Political Justice*

Although effectively applying the sensationalist psychology of Locke, Cheyne, Whytt, Cullen, Brown and Hartley, Godwin carefully chooses language so as to weave together the current medical debate and the controversial moral issues. This allows him to analyse the metaphysical body in a manner that fuses together the causes of bodily motions and of benevolence. Godwin replaces some medical with more familiar terminology. He preferred to use more abstract word like "thought" instead of "sentient soul" or "involuntary agent of the nerves." The word "thought" is employed to mean an

¹⁰⁰ Hartley's treatise was widely read amongst contemporary intellectuals such as William Hazlitt, James Mill, J.S. Mill and Joseph Priestly. James Mill, J.S. Mill's father, admired the book, and strongly recommended his son to read it, and J.S. Mill read Hartley's *Observations* in 1822. The influence of Hartley upon the philosopher-scientist Joseph Priestley is well attested by the fact that in 1775 Priestley brought out a condensed version of the *Observations* entitled *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind, on the Principle of the Association of Ideas; with Essays Relating to the Subject of It*

impersonal agent that organises involuntary motions of the animal system, namely without volition or design (*PJ* 363). Thought is one operative part of “mind” and the other is a second thought, which Godwin calls “consciousness” (*PJ* 364). The confrontation between the conscious part of the mind and the involuntary motion of thought is no mere repetition of the Cartesian opposition between soul and body, but is carefully rationalised by Godwin’s application of the necessity theory. From it, he derives the following discussions which are all interrelated: of truth and delusion, inquisitive rational thinking and prejudice, knowledge and error or habit (*PJ* 275), free-will and necessity, active and passive powers of the human mind, and voluntary and involuntary actions.

Political Justice draws heavily on the metaphors of a chain. The metaphor of the chain, which was by this time almost a cliché, is a prerequisite in the exposing of the “involutions of motive.” Whether a motive, especially a moral one, is voluntary or not, that is, based on a free self-determinism, is a problem Godwin explores in *Political Justice*, and one that was treated as an enigma by the association theorists like Hartley. Hartley could neither attribute the cause of impulse or pressure to nothing but the immediate agency of the Deity,¹⁰¹ nor assign “an infinitesimal elementary Body” or particle to be “intermediate between the Soul and gross Body” (*OM* i 34). He accounts for “Changes” by referring to “our Sensations, ideas, and Motions,” which “may

(J. Johnson, London, 1775).

¹⁰¹ Hartley writes, “Now that some Powers of Attraction or Repulsion, or rather both at different Distances, reside in the small Particles of the medullary Substance, can scarce be doubted after so many Instances and Evidences, as Sir Isaac Newton has produced, of attractive and repulsive Powers in the small Particles of various Bodies, *Optics, Query* 31. Meaning, as he does, by Attraction and Repulsion, a mere mathematical Tendency to approach and recede, be the Cause what it will, Impulse, Pressure, an unknown one, or no physical Cause at all, but the immediate Agency of the Deity” (*OM* i 20).

correspond to the Changes made in the medullary Substance, only so far as these correspond to the Changes made in the elementary Body” (ibid.). This seems inherently paradoxical, and we are to find no way out from the circle: “Where does our sensation arise from?”

Thought, Godwin says, is “an essential link in the chain” (ibid.) that holds the whole internal history of the human mind on the principle of association. Every external action that the body takes, he says, was chosen by a volition which again is preceded by another volition and so on, and any quest for the first self-determination that allows freedom for the mind is in vain. Godwin’s critical attitude towards wholly arbitrary or free self-determinism¹⁰² is based on the theory of association, which necessarily deconstructs the binary between the mind and body. This has an origin in the Hartleyan theory of vibration.¹⁰³ Since vibrations are caused by certain external or internal impacts or impressions, they are by nature passive and hence may be appropriately figures as chains. The nervous or generic reaction of vibration can hardly be called a “voluntary action” which Godwin claims must be “the true essence of a motive” (*PJ* 379). The chain of necessity which Godwin frequently alludes to is in most cases passive and lacks an active agency: “Mind is a real principle, an indispensable link in the great chain of the universe; but not, as has sometimes been supposed, a principle of that paramount description as to supersede all necessities, and be itself subject to no

¹⁰² In the chapter ‘Of Free Will and Necessity,’ Godwin asserts that “[a]ll the acts, except the first, were necessary, and followed each other as inevitably as the links of a chain,” but maintains that however much you trace back the chain, “that act, which gives the character of freedom to the whole, can never be discovered” (*PJ* 347).

¹⁰³ Godwin’s reference to the vibration theory is made in *Political Justice*. “The sense of feeling is diffused over every part of my body, I feel the different substances that support me, the pen I guide, various affections and petty irregularities in different parts of my frame, nay, the very air that environs me. But all these impressions are absolutely simultaneous, and I can have only one perception at once” (*PJ* 371).

laws and methods of operation” (*PJ* 352).

The Aeolian (Eolian) harp is another important metaphor.¹⁰⁴ From a conservative viewpoint, chains in the revolutionary discourse were favourably perceived as a restraint on passions. Burke’s chain of the passions, as the counterpart to Godwin’s chain of the mind, alludes to a controlling device of untamable destructive passions that in 1789 had temporarily escaped from prison in the caverns of the mind.¹⁰⁵ It was therefore pertinent that Burke, in defending traditional government, had written approvingly of the ‘fetters on the passions’, but St Clair cogently points out that in Godwin’s *Political Justice* it is not emotion which government has chained but insight into the truth.¹⁰⁶ The Aeolian harp, consisting of a simple oblong frame, loosely strung with strings, which emitted musical sounds when placed in a breeze, has relevance to the nervous theory of vibration, for the eighteenth-century sensationalist psychologists like Cheyne or Whytt greatly relied on the metaphor of the musical instrument, whether it be the organ or string instruments.

In this light it is interesting to observe Godwin’s allusion to man’s constitution against the wind:

If anyone should choose to imagine that this idea of virtue is strained too high, yet all must allow that no man can be entitled to our confidence who *trembles at every wind*, who can endure no adversity, and whose very existence is linked to the artificial *character* he sustains.” (*PJ* 413, italics mine)

¹⁰⁴ The Aeolian harp was more often used as a metaphor for the imagination for Romantic poets.

¹⁰⁵ Burton Ralph Pollin explains that Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* acquired a new popularity, as the Reign of Terror appeared to justify the worst fears of the men of good will and good estate. See *Education and Enlightenment in the Works of William Godwin* (New York: Las Americas Publishing Company, 1962), p.20.

¹⁰⁶ William St.Clair, *The Godwins and the Shelleys: The Biography of a Family*

Godwin is clearly denouncing the idea of the excessive sensitivity of a person to every bodily impression. However, the fundamental paradox of sensibility and its “quickness of apprehension” results in leaving the subject susceptible to the wind of the world, while simultaneously enabling him or her to gain knowledge. The very same sensitivity that makes one tremble at every wind, Godwin himself notes, is also the cause of remarkable improvement in human understanding.¹⁰⁷ If all knowledge is the result of perception (*PJ* 338), that is, if all knowledge originates from external influences, how can one tell the truth from other possibly deceptive influences?

The epistemological problem on which David Hume had stumbled may be comparable to this case. He asks himself:

“Can I be sure that, in leaving all established opinions, I am following truth? and by what criterion shall I distinguish her, even if fortune should at last guide me on her foot steps? After the most accurate and exact of my reasoning, I can give no reason why I should assent to it, and feel nothing but a strong propensity to consider objects strongly in that view under which they appear to me” (*HN* 265).

Hume’s helplessness is expressed through his awe at the sublime immensity of “that boundless ocean.” Lost in “forlorn solitude,” he feels himself weak, disordered and unable to mingle and unite in society, and for this reason he gives himself the appellation of “monster” (*ibid.*). This powerful image of himself as an outcast or

(London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), pp.89,90.

¹⁰⁷ The extract relevant to this statement is in *Political Justice*. “We are, by various causes, excluded from a minute observation of the progress of the infant mind, and therefore do not readily conceive by how imperceptible advances it arrives at a *quickness of apprehension*, relative to the simplest sentences. But we more easily remark its subsequent improvement, and perceive how long it is, before it can apprehend a discourse of considerable length, or a sentence of great abstraction” (*PJ*

“monster” and his self-reproach represent the impregnable and all too plastic mind that cannot thrust aside the remaining objects that prevent reason from arriving at “truth.” This inability to confront the “boundless ocean” and process a rational selection of truth is most prominently stated in his famous passage: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (*HN* 415).¹⁰⁸

In contrast, the rationalist Godwin¹⁰⁹ dreamed of the world of the Houyhnhnms where law and government would be unnecessary.¹¹⁰ He resorts to reason and justice to extricate himself from the chain of association. With a tone of optimism in *Political Justice*, he unfolds a positive theory of human motivation. His distinction between direct and indirect motives allows him to affirm the existence of voluntary action, as he explains that the direct motive is “present to the mind of the agent at the time of his determination” (*PJ* 383). When he encourages the reader to acquire knowledge, the reader is to approach it with such an active or direct motive that one detaches oneself from the established habit of thinking or involuntary action. Godwin is never sceptical of knowledge and the human capacity to reach truth, and this he claims

358). Italics added.

¹⁰⁸ Burton Ralph Pollin does not deny Hume’s rationalist position completely. He writes, “Hume has still left the door open for the supremacy of reason, in that the initial perception of the value of the object, preceding the desire itself, can be deemed an intellectual or rational process.” See Burton Pollin (1962), p.42. Pollin’s assessment of Hume is fair because Hume does note the counterforce of reason which could contradict the initial passion: “’Tis possible, therefore, that this passion can be oppos’d by, or be contradictory to truth and reason; since this contradiction consists in the disagreement of ideas, consider’d as copies, with those objects, which they represent” (*HN* 415).

¹⁰⁹ Chris Jones admits some inconsistencies, but Godwin together with Wollstonecraft is classified in the same framework of radical Sensibility who took issue with the sentimental feelings of the conservative Sensibility. See Jones (1993), p.76.

¹¹⁰ Robert Kieley *The Romantic Novel in England* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972), p.85.

is communicated to the human mind through the “inlet of the senses”: “if we acquire knowledge, we must open our eyes, and contemplate the universe” (*PJ* 413), and rise independently out of these feelings to think rationally. For Godwin, truth does not reside in such a frail character that is never capable of developing “fortitude,” the strength which enables one to “grow[s] out of a sense of our difficulty of this independence” (*ibid.*).

When Coleridge told Godwin that Coleridge was a “creature of mere Impact,” at the same time suggesting that he lacked the “self-directing Principle,” acknowledging his weakness in resisting external pressures and impulses, Godwin must have felt the need for Coleridge to change, or at least to build strength.¹¹¹ Weak and easily impressed as he was, Coleridge, using his bird-images, portrayed himself as a “self-caged” starling without motion and action, and therefore characterised himself as indolent.¹¹² Such self-containment as was directly associated with sensibility is reminiscent of Rousseau’s or Yorick’s aspiration to pastoral retreat and their self-alienation from society and commerce. This alienation, however, entails an element of pathos, as G.A.Starr maintains, and can be regarded as a cathartic reinforcement of the existing scheme of things rather than a challenge to it.¹¹³

The revelation of truth, for Godwin, is possible through communication, but whether the communication should be through reasoning or through an outpouring of affections that directly appeal to the addressee is left obscure. In *Caleb Williams* there remains a certain degree of ambivalence as to whether Godwin is or isn’t registering the

¹¹¹ Richard Holmes believes that Coleridge’s formidable self-indictment does not entirely escape the paradox of self-celebration, because Coleridge would rather explore and exploit his weaknesses than change them. See *Coleridge: Early Visions*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), p.315.

¹¹² Richard Holmes (1989), p.314.

influence of the feelings on what he means by reason and truth. Here we can detect the influence of Hume. Falkland's sensibility especially to his own crime is closely bound up with his interaction with Caleb's curious and sensitive mind. The relationship between sensibility and the truth-claims results in an epistemological questions of what is true, and an ethical problem of who is benevolent. In reading his *Caleb Williams*, my primary question must include, first, what is sensibility for Godwin, second, what is its relation to truth, human motive and knowledge, and, lastly, what do the MS ending and published ending signify in relation to these two questions?

3. Falkland's Sensibility

The novel form, Godwin writes, enabled him to do "the thing in which my imagination revelled the most freely . . . the analysis of the private and internal operations of the mind, employing my metaphysical dissecting knife in tracing and laying bare the involutions of motive, and recording the gradually accumulating impulses."¹¹⁴ Godwin did not approve of revolution but was a supporter of "a gradual, but uninterrupted change" (*PJ* 251) through reformation, which is a direct consequence of the improvement of the human mind. Human motive, for Godwin, was an essential component of political justice and what he perceived as truth. Originally titled *Things as They are, or The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, the novel can be called a political fable in which the question of change or progress is explored.¹¹⁵ The problem of human agency is treated within the fictional framework. Being a political campaigner against

¹¹³ G.A.Starr, (1994), p.194.

¹¹⁴ This line is quoted in William St Clair, (1989), p.119.

¹¹⁵ George Sherburn writes that *Caleb Williams* is the only novel which 'deals with contemporary problems—with the bad state of "things as they are."' *St.Leon*, for example, is a fantasy based on the superstitions and manners of the early Renaissance.

aristocratic society, Godwin shows the diverse social contexts which reveal the unjust imposition of despotic powers.

Godwin's confessional style of narrative permits the narrator to deliver this truth, behind the curtain as it were. Godwin followed Thomas Paine in alluding to or parodying the veiled theatrical stage of aristocracy, behind which the truth is hidden. Paine compares "contemptible" monarchy to "something kept behind a curtain, about which there is a great deal of bustle and fuss, and a wonderful air of seeming solemnity," and Paine's drama is unquestionably a comedy whereby you "burst into laughter" when, by any accident, the curtain happens to be open.¹¹⁶ Godwin takes the political situation more sternly, and turns the comedy into "tragedy" (*CW* 79). The narrative of Caleb invites the reader to see not only the state of an outcast, but also his state of mind and his motives. The stage is set for his fate and not for that of Falkland, Emily or the Hawkinses. He "lift[s] the curtain"(ibid.) only when a narrative concerning his fate is to be disclosed, and not at the beginning of the novel.

Caleb Williams, the hero and the narrator of the novel, is a man of common upbringing and with no important family name. The only thing he holds, his essential quality in the Godwinian sense, is his inquisitive mind: "I [Caleb] was not born indeed to the possession of hereditary wealth; but I had a better inheritance, an enterprising mind, an inquisitive spirit, a liberal ambition"(*CW* 255). Falkland, however, is a landed aristocrat, of considerable fame, fortune and name; he becomes the patron of Caleb after the latter's parents die. Within the novel, another narrative of Mr.Collins about the earlier history of Falkland is included. The first part of the novel is more or less based

See "Godwin's Later Novels" in *Studies in Romanticism*. vol. I. No.2. 1962, p.65.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Paine. *The Rights of Man* ed. Eric Foner (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p.182. Hereafter cited as *Rights of Man* with page numbers in parentheses.

on Falkland's confrontation with Tyrrel, and through Mr.Collins's narrative, Caleb as well as the reader is acquainted with Falkland's "previous character" (*CW* 11). The narrative is gradually retrieved by Caleb's curiosity to know the truth.

Tyrrel is depicted as a self-centred squire, whose general manner was "noisy and obstreperous, inattentive to others; and obstinate and unyielding, from an incapacity to conceive those finer feelings" (*CW* 47). The assessment of the character made by Mr Clare, with a relatively objective view, therefore seems to hold true. He characterises Tyrrel as boisterous, rugged and unfeeling (*CW* 35). His vices (*CW* 37) which are rooted in his insensibility are comparable to a typical villainous figure such as the "unfeeling" villain, Montoni, in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794).¹¹⁷ On the other hand, sensitive Falkland had the reputation of having dignity and good humour, and perpetually paying attention to the happiness of others with his delicacy of sentiment. Mr.Clare's warning against Falkland's sensibility resonates with St.Aubert's warning to Emily of the dangers of sensibility, and is also premonitory: "you are too passionate, too acutely sensible of injury" (*CW* 35). There is evidently a moral divide between a man of feeling and one of unfeeling. Godwin's sentimental belief in benevolence as the strong source of pleasure is derived not just from the sentimentalist school of Shaftsbury or Hume, but from Hartley, who perceived moral good as arising from the instinctive pleasure of contributing to the welfare of others. Sentimental virtue derives from an outpouring of

¹¹⁷ The virtuous St.Aubert expotulates Emily about the importance of feeling while warning against the dangers of Sensibility. He says, "you see, my dear, that though I would guard you against the dangers of sensibility, I am not an advocate for apathy. At your age I should have said that is a vice more hateful than all the errors of sensibility, and I say so still." See Ann Radcliffe *The Mysteries of Udolpho* ed.Bonamy Dobree (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1970), p.80. Hereafter cited as *MU* with page numbers in parentheses.

sympathy aroused by a particular spectacle¹¹⁸ that impresses the sensitive subject. At least the “previous Mr.Falkland” and Emily can be characterised as a morally superior and benevolent subject of sensibility.

The relationship between the tyrannical Tyrrel and the victimised Emily may be seen as prefiguring the later relationship between Falkland and Caleb in that despotic Tyrrel and Falkland manipulate the power of wealth and the law. The antagonistic relation between the two squires, Falkland and Tyrrel, produces a political tension openly in public, whereas the aggressive revenge or unjustifiable “defense” of Falkland against Caleb Williams, is scrupulously disguised and hidden from the community of people, because the former’s social position allows him to do so. Godwin sets this secret between them as “truth,” which is not fully and justly revealed before the public until the novel’s conclusion. As Tysdahl asserts, “the social criticism embedded in the story is coherent” in terms of class: power rests with landowners who only too easily find that might is right.’¹¹⁹

Emily with “an uncommon degree of sensibility” (*CW* 39) is reminiscent of Emily St.Aubert in *Udolpho*, but her character is more that of a typical Gothic heroine than of a benevolent and virtuous leader, being confined, though not in a medieval castle, in Tyrrel Place and deceived into a trap contrived by Tyrrel and the impetuous wooer Grimes. Tyrrel’s infernal scheme against his own cousin has no other motive except his feeling of envy and jealousy against Falkland’s virtuous disposition and fame. Tyrrel’s revenge against Falkland was directed towards Emily, and occurred through the legal action of prosecuting her for failing to pay him a debt. This triggered her illness

¹¹⁸ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), p.140.

¹¹⁹ B.J.Tysdahl, *William Godwin as Novelist* (London: Athlone, 1981), p.35.

and later death.

According to Hartley's treatise, those with sensibility are compassionate, and grieve and feel for the misery of others (*OM* i 475). Such a scene involving Emily's tragic death which Falkland observed was "most exquisitely agonizing to a man of his acute sensibility" (*CW* 86). As Hartley writes, "Persons whose *nerves* are easily irritable, and those who have experienced great Trials and Afflictions, are, in general, more disposed to Compassion than others" (*OM* i 475, italics added), Godwin's sensitive hero cannot bear the spectacle.

Hawkins, a tenant-farmer, perceives that "the law was better adapted for a weapon of tyranny in the hands of the rich" (*CW* 73), and this is proven right later by Tyrrel's despotism inflicted upon himself. The emphatic point is made in the novel that Falkland is portrayed as an equal to Tyrrel, while Emily, being an orphan daughter of Tyrrel's aunt, and Hawkins a mere farmer, possess no means to free themselves from the slavish oppression. The social or class relations render both Emily and Hawkins materially dependent upon Tyrrel's benevolent charity or justice which he does not offer, and they are at the mercy of Tyrrel's "order" and his decisions.

Tyrrel seems to possess the character of the typical tyrant, and cannot stand any equals. His driving force for the evil prosecution of Emily is one of Hartley's four classes of sympathetic affections, those by which we grieve for the Happiness of others (*OM* i 482). These feelings are called emulation and envy,¹²⁰ and Tyrrel's heart was

¹²⁰ Hartley's detailed account of this feelings is given thus: "These are founded in the Desire of Pleasures, Honours, Riches, Power, &c.; and the consequent engrossing what others desire, losing what they obtain, in a Comparison of our own Acquisitions with those of others &c.; by which the Happiness of others is connected with our Misery; so that at last we become uneasy at their Happiness, even where there is no such Connexion; i.e. emulate and envy where our own Interest is no-ways concerned" (*OM* i 482).

burning with such “mean jealousy” (*CW* 65). Falkland visits him to reason with him suggesting that they should not interfere with each others’ business and let each suffer the other to pursue his own track unmolested: “We neither of us wish to change roads” (*CW* 29). This is clearly referring to the line from *Political Justice*.

“[A man’s] progress must be upon the plain line of reason and truth. As long as he *keeps the open road*, his journey is prosperous and promising; but, if he turn aside into by-paths, he will soon come to a point where there is no longer either avenue or track” (*PJ* 501, italics added).

Falkland well remembers Mr.Clare’s admonition to stay on the track of reason; “Beware of Mr.Tyrrel,” (*CW* 34) “I would have you governed by reason and justice” (*CW* 35).

What does this expostulation signify in relation to assessing the nature of sensibility? When set against Godwin’s metaphor of “the open road” in *Political Justice*, Falkland’s approach to the vices of Tyrrel seems to suggest that he is strictly adhering to reason and uninterrupted intellectual thinking. Nevertheless, as Mr.Clare anticipates, Falkland’s overwhelming passions defy this rule, and he “has come to a point where there is no longer either avenue or track.” Falkland later confesses to Caleb, “I am the murderer of Tyrrel” (*CW* 135), and the actual diversion leading to his murdering Tyrrel gives him yet more pain. His imagination is easily excited by even a mention of this case, and his burying himself in solitude (*CW* 109) is one way of escaping external stimuli that involuntarily excite his nerves.

As Caleb’s suspicion of Falkland’s crime grows, however, the former’s act of spying and curious and aggressive remarks provoke Falkland and “touched the spring that wakened madness in [his] mind.” (*CW* 117). There are numerous references to the involuntary movement of the nerves or springs in relation to Falkland’s crime and his

conscience. When Falkland, as an auditor, confronts the similar situation to his own murder case, his minute bodily reaction to the scene is recorded.

He [Falkland] at one time started with astonishment, and at another shifted his posture like a man who is unable longer to endure the sensations that press upon him. Then he new strung his nerves to stubborn patience. I could see, while his muscles preserved an inflexible steadiness, tears of anguish roll down his cheeks. He dared not trust his eyes to glance towards the side of the room where I stood; (*CW* 129)

In this passage we can observe Godwin's attempt to dissect Falkland's bodily interaction of the nerves without the intervention of his will. The sensations overtake Falkland, however strenuously he keeps them in control, and "tears" become a sign of his sensible constitution that does not betray the chain or association of his past deed. It is through observing it that Caleb's suspicion towards Falkland becomes ever stronger, and he finally recognises that Hawkins has been wrongly accused. Caleb's sensibility is quick to perceive that for Falkland the word "murder" is "the master key that wakes distemper" (*CW* 126), the "key" that causes a vibration of the nerves. We may perceive this idea of "murder" as a Hartleyian vibratiuncle,¹²¹ which is begotten in the medullary substance in the brain after a repeated sensory vibration. Caleb's presence will act on Falkland's nervous system and stimulate his acute sensibility towards his crime, because the presence of Caleb for Falkland is a reminder of truth¹²² or his

¹²¹ Vibratiuncles are "a disposition to diminutive Vibrations" and these are begot in the medullary Substance of the Brain after certain sensory vibrations are repeated frequently enough (*OM* i 58).

¹²² Caleb's inquisitive mind and his search for truth is a threat to Mr. Falkland not only in realistic terms, but also in their biblical connotation. Marilyn Butler notes that Caleb is named after the spy whom Moses sent into the Promised Land—aptly, since curiosity is his chief quality, the search for truth his goal. See *Jane Austen and the War*

conscious guilt which is chained to his murder. Falkland is afraid of the sight of Caleb: he “dared not trust” his own eyes.

Such a man as Falkland himself confesses that he values his reputation, “My life has been spent in the keenest and most unintermitted sensibility to reputation” (*CW* 101). His fear of his crime becoming public knowledge is so great that he would rather have Caleb under his perpetual supervision than have himself “insulted, disgraced, polluted in the face of hundreds” (*CW* 135). Caleb’s pursuit of truth with his thirst of knowledge thus caused the necessary consequence; as Falkland’s claims “[a]ll are but links of one chain” (*ibid.*). One event, a blow from Tyrrel, leads to another, a murder, and the next business, he says, is to defend himself. In the novel, chains are used also as a metaphor of sympathetic relations between contiguous ideas or sentiments within one individual. Caleb describes his involuntary sympathy; “One sentiment flows by necessity of nature into another sentiment of the same general character” (*CW* 133). Godwinian rationality is on the whole based on “foresight” or “probability” and the links of the chain signify the acts, events, or thoughts that are logically associated.

4. Validity of Truth

Godwin’s understanding of a person’s character shares the same logic. He defines the word ‘character’ in *Political Justice* as “the result of a long series of impressions, communicated to a person’s mind and modifying it in a certain manner, so as to enable us, a number of these modifications and impressions being given, to predict his conduct” (*PJ* 341).¹²³ It is therefore suggested that people’s expectation about one’s

of *Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p.71.

¹²³ Godwin makes a more elaborate analysis of human character in relation to what he perceives as “true history” in “Essay on History and Romance” (1797). He writes, “True

conduct is based on the already acquired knowledge of that person, which establishes an idea of that person's "character." Falkland's change in character therefore perplexes Caleb's rational inquiry: "No two characters can be in certain respects more strongly contrasted, than the Falkland of a date prior and subsequent to these events," (*CW* 97) after the trial of the murder case. "Previous Falkland" was heroic and his quick change into "anti-hero" is one of the novel's stark impression which also bewilders the audience-reader. His character, his act of murder and his enslaving of Caleb are all hidden behind the public scene, and "the reign of triumphant falshood" (*CW* 302) gives the deceptive image of Falkland. It is the reader's "curiosity," according to Godwin, that is required in the investigation of a character: "he[the genuine scholar] is ever upon the watch for further, and still further particulars. Trembling for his own fallibility and frailty, he employs every precaution to guard himself against them" (*EHR* 294). Godwin himself boasts, in studying historical figures, "I am not contented to observe such a man upon the public stage, I would follow him into his closet" (*ibid.*). This is precisely what Caleb is up to. When pursuing evidences of Falkland's crime, he goes through Falkland's drawers in his private room stealing a glance at his letters (*CW* 114, 5).

Godwin's circumspect approach to investigating character or truth is a severe critique of the duplicity of a person with rank and wealth. Once in the habit of looking up to him as a kind and benevolent ruler or landowner, not only the people of his society in the fictional world, but we, the readers, become reluctant to accept anything different.

history consists in a delineation of consistent, human character, in a display of the manner in which such a character acts under successive circumstances, in showing how character increases and assimilates new substances to its own, and how it decays, together with the catastrophe into which by its own gravity it naturally declines." See 'Essay of History and Romance' in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin. Vol. 5: Educational and Literary Writings*. ed. Pamela Clemit (London: William Pickering, 1993), p.301. Hereafter cited as *EHR* with page numbers in parentheses.

The heroic chivalric virtue of Falkland is stressed throughout the first part of the novel, when he rescues Emily displaying his power in its best aspect. When his character is changed, we are at once led to doubt its coherence, just as Caleb is confounded.

However there is certainly a contradiction in this method. While Godwin makes Caleb rely on Falkland's changed "character" as the principal reason to suspect him as the real culprit, he also makes Caleb's detection count on the reliable and supposedly coherent and innocent "character" of Hawkins. Caleb cannot understand the inconsistency of Hawkins's character: "So firm, so sturdily honest and just, as he appeared at first; all at once to become a murderer!" (*CW* 107)

There is still another turn to this argument. The judgement of Caleb's character itself made by people (including those he associated with during his service to Falkland), after his falsely being accused of theft, is wholly based on his status as a criminal, an outcast of society. The only impartial or potentially impartial judge, other than the penetrating Brightwel and Mr. Raymond, is the reader. Hence, the predicament of Caleb in the second part of the novel is also the predicament of truth. The truth that Caleb's narrative sustains is set against a series of falsehoods which are put to trial.

In the first instance where Caleb's truth is tried, Caleb challenges Falkland's sense of justice and his conscious guilt. There is certainly a touch of naivety in Caleb in believing Falkland's sense of justice, and in calling upon Falkland to be his evidence (*CW* 169) and putting his life and reputation at risk in doing so. This may be an allusion to a theme of the father-son metaphor of the monarchy and people in *Political Justice*, in which Godwin shows "what it is like to be terrorised within existing society, by the very father-figures whom Burke idealises."¹²⁴ In this situation, no one except Caleb

¹²⁴ Marilyn Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*

and Falkland can perceive or know the truth that Caleb is not guilty of theft. Caleb's sentimental address to Falkland, however, merely meets with the latter's cold response and duplicity. When Falkland accuses Caleb of using the language of "romance" and not of reason (*CW* 175), the former who in youth was much in love with the concept of chivalry, is turning his back on his own virtue. In this case, truth fails; Caleb knows the truth about Falkland and Falkland lies about him, but it is Falkland, the landowner, who gains credence unquestioningly from the party concerned, while Caleb is persecuted and imprisoned as a result of this.

When put into jail, Caleb meets Brightwel, also a victim of society's injustice. "He heard my story, as far as I thought proper to disclose it, with interest, he examined it with sincere impartiality, and, if at first any doubt remained upon his mind, a frequent observation of me in my most unguarded moments taught him in no long time to place an unreserved confidence in my innocence" (*CW* 192). The impartiality is being emphasised in this case, as with Mr Raymond, the leader of robbers. Mr Raymond knows that Caleb "is not guilty of what is laid to his charge" (*CW* 223). Rationalising Caleb's statement, he comments that his escape is no confirmation of his guilt, and, what is more, there is no one fool enough to volunteer to stand trial to prove his innocence unless he is innocent.

The cases of Laura and Mr Collins further reveal the nature of truth and its relation with sensibility. One of the most paradoxical arguments in Godwin's theory concerns the pursuit of knowledge. Although his sensationalist approach to the knowledge of truth is wholly dependent on a person's sensible disposition, "quickness of apprehension," because this same sensibility renders the subject acutely aware of his

or her vulnerability to the “contamination of regressive institutions,”¹²⁵ he or she is not to blame for the flight from knowledge which is potentially harmful to or representative of the “reign of triumphant falsehood” in the person’s character. The question is, how can one attain the sense of independence in making his or her judgement? The impracticability of Godwin’s ambition about “the naked strength of the will to emancipate ourselves from the force of habit” is suggested by William Hazlitt, who compares Godwin’s quest to the passage to “the Arctic Circle and Frozen Regions where the understanding is no longer warmed by the affections.”¹²⁶ Hazlitt’s critique of cold reason which is independent of affection has a Rousseauvian tinge. In *The Confessions*, Rousseau attacks Count de Saint Pierre’s moral writings which say that men are motivated by their intelligence rather than by their passions; although Rousseau acknowledges the usefulness of the idea, he believes it “impracticable” (*Confessions* 381). ‘Practical’ Rousseau, on the other hand, acknowledges the effect of the external world, including that of climate, seasons, sounds, colours, darkness, light, the elements, food, noise, silence, movement, repose and so on, as controlling those feelings which we allow to dominate at their very onset (*ibid.*). Godwin’s ambition is to reverse this tide by asserting that truth is omnipotent: “If truth, when properly displayed, be omnipotent, then neither climate nor luxury are invincible obstacles” (*PJ* 146).

Hartley’s famous proposition about regulating and improving external impressions has had an influence on the Romantic belief in the “return to nature” (*Confessions* 381). Mr Clare, the poet, in many ways reminds us of a romantic solitary wanderer depicted by Rousseau, and his independence of mind we may presume is

¹²⁵ Chris Jones, (1997), p.78.

¹²⁶ William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age: or Contemporary Portraits* (1825) in *Lives of The Great Romantics*: vol.I ed. Pamela Clemit. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1999),

drawn not only from his disposition but the solitary life he leads. Godwin seems to be praising this quality in Mr Clare, but, if his clearness or purity of mind is not separate from the conception of avoiding the 'evil' influences that contaminate his mind, Laura's case should be justified on the same premise, namely to be conscious of "proper Adjustment of the Impressions and Associations" (*Confessions* 381).

Laura's remote retirement in the country has the same Rousseauvian implication that there is a need to control and adjust the environment to limit incoming sense-impressions. The rural life of Laura's family has a paradisiacal image, in which only benevolent and harmless people coexist with Nature: "Among people thus remote from the bustle of human life there is an open spirit of confidence, by means of which, a stranger easily finds access to their benevolence and good will" (*CW* 290). Laura's decision to eschew the encounter with Caleb long after attaching her affections to his "amiable" character was ironically based on "the sentiments of unbounded esteem" for Falkland. Laura had been accustomed to thinking of him only in favourable terms. Godwin seems to be vindicating the knowledge that is communicated through the senses and not based on the prejudice of society. However, Laura is too timid to entertain these senses because she is afraid Caleb, with his skills and eloquence, might inflict "deceptive influence" upon her mind. Hence, the imperfect society which Godwin condemns can make sensitive characters withdraw from knowledge. Laura, with "a wonderful quickness of eye, and rapidity of apprehension" (*CW* 292) chooses to block the influence altogether when reading the fiction of "miraculous adventures of Caleb Williams" (*CW* 268). The fabricated story of Caleb Williams which Laura unsuspectingly reads influences her mind before she hears his story directly told by

himself.

Woman's sensibility in the late eighteenth century is epitomised in the figure of Laura. Her credulity over the fictive narrative and the dangerous influence of novels upon her mind becomes linked with the metaphysical frailty of her body. Godwin clearly states that women have a frame of body more delicate and susceptible of impression than men, and, "in proportion as they receive a less intellectual education, are more unreservedly under the empire of feeling."¹²⁷ The gender implication that women's body is weaker than men's is articulated by the former's inability to subordinate passions or feelings that are generated by impressions made upon the body. Laura's positive characteristic as having a "wonderful quickness of eye, and rapidity of apprehension" falls back on the same female credulity that is directly associated with her weakness.

It seems that Godwin's portraiture of female characters has strong resonance with Robert Whytt who believed that people with a more delicate bodily constitution are more exposed to the impressions made on the mind or "excited by the action of external objects" (*ON* 51, 115). Most of these writers held a gender-specific view about the body and its relation with the sensibility of the whole nervous system. Emily's nervous disorder, we may say, is explained chiefly by her weak and delicate body which is susceptible to external impressions. When she is harassed by her cousin, Tyrrel, with unjust persecution, the "painful and incredible reality that was thus presented, effectually dissipated the illusions of frenzy to which she had just been a prey" (*CW* 84).

Aged and weakened, Mr Collins is effeminised in his characterisation. When

¹²⁷ William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'* (1798) ed. Richard Holmes (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1987), p.276. Hereafter cited as *Memoirs* with page numbers in parentheses.

he refuses to hear Caleb's story, his fear of knowing it suggests withered "fortitude," which Godwin claims is the precondition for discerning truth (*PJ* 413): "now in his declining years, his own fortitude shrunk from it?" (*CW* 311). Caleb's address to Laura runs through the whole Godwinian notion of knowledge versus ignorance, or experience versus innocence: "Can you believe then, that ignorance is the only, or the safest, preservation of integrity?" (*CW* 300). By calling into question the very notion of knowledge, he is challenging both the regressive attitude towards enlightenment knowledge, and the biblical association of knowledge with sin. This is implicitly noted in Godwin's *Political Justice*: "Innocence is not virtue. Virtue demands the active employment of an ardent mind in the promotion of the general good" (*PJ* 153).

The published ending, where Caleb's obstinate pursuit of truth is finally made fruitful, is "better Godwin"(xx) as McCracken suggests, precisely because of the coherence in Godwin's doctrine. When Caleb's true story is finally disclosed, or his truth that Falkland was "indeed the murderer of Tyrrel" (*CW* 321) is "confessed" (*CW* 314) in public, justice is done. Godwin seems to be saying that it is not Caleb's emotion laid bare before people that gives conviction, but "a faithful narrative" that is being unfolded in the court. In the manuscript ending the whole truth is crushed in the hands of the despots who conspire with the law and so buried.

In *Political Justice*, Godwin often personifies truth, and to some extent confers "power" on that truth. Rather than the audience assessing the truthfulness of a story, the "force of truth" influences or even overwhelms their mind (*PJ* 142, 137). This rhetoric causes confusion as to where he locates agency. Hence the question, "does truth come forward by itself or active operation of the human mind is the only agent that understands and judges?" Therefore Paul Hamilton finds a paradox in the published

ending of *Caleb Williams*. The paradox lies in Caleb's having a confidence in the integrity of public credence which is more than hypothetical, coexisting with a profound scepticism concerning the existing means of communicating the truth.¹²⁸ The "faithful narrative" of truth which Caleb tells gains the credence of the public as it were, but we are left to wonder whether it was his "cool reason" (*CW* 319) that persuaded the audience or his "penitence" and "grief and compunction" (*CW* 324) that found rapport with their feeling. This brings us back to the same question, "Is truth communicated through reason or feeling?" Thus the nature of the audience's conviction or belief in "a faithful narrative" remains unexplained.

The Godwinian truth, as he himself maintains, is grounded on human motivation. Since one motive leads to another, one act, or event to another, making the chain of connection, Godwin is not without conviction that truth is inevitably traced back, or the curtain unveiled. Falkland and Caleb both either voluntarily or involuntarily cut themselves off from society. The former stays away from society to veil his past conduct, and the latter runs away because he failed to adequately present himself in relation to his past suspicious conduct. However the chain of mind strongly connects each with his own internal history, and perhaps more with each other. Life without sociability leaves them to reflect on their past memories. These two individuals demonstrate opposite cases where the former suffers from the memory of the past which is inevitably chained to his mind, and the latter is saved and amused because he is able to retrieve through memory his pleasant past. Falkland "bur[ies] himself in solitude"(109) to evade any impression made upon his sensitive mind, so as not to

¹²⁸ Paul Hamilton quotes from John Thelwall, *The Tribune* 3 vols (London, 1795-6) pp.42,3, pp.101-5. See 'Coleridge and Godwin in the 1790s' in *The Coleridge Connection: Essays for Thomas McFarland* eds. R.Gravil and M.Lefebure (London:

recover his past memories. Falkland's melancholic state was a consequence of turning his feelings back into himself and not letting them out: "Nothing could reach the heart of Falkland. He was not insensible to the general kindness and exertions; but it was too evident that the melancholy that had taken hold of his mind was invincible" (*CW* 101). Caleb's melancholic reflections of his "imprisoned" circumstances, on the other hand, are, overcome with the power of his mind to liberate himself from external degradation. Amongst his melancholic reflections, he "tasked [his] memory, and counted over the doors, the locks, the bolts, the *chains*, the massy walls and grated windows that were between me and liberty" (*CW* 181). Caleb's fettered state and susceptibility to the outer world are most cleverly fused in the same image. However, he was not fettered with the conscious guilt that took hold of Falkland: "In solitude we can pursue our own thoughts undisturbed; and I[Caleb] was able to call up at will the most pleasing avocations" (*CW* 201).

Thus, Godwin permits the notion of chain to reach out to both painful and pleasing effects according to necessary consequences. This is where the Godwinian virtue that "good is a general name, including pleasure . . . [and] evil is a general name, including pain" (*PJ* 390) is most incisively expressed in the novel, because it is a sign of virtue that Caleb's pleasing thought is retrieved even in a dreary dungeon, while Falkland's painful recollection points to his past crime.

Or can this be vice? Falkland's sensitivity to all external impressions associated with his crime is in one sense a testimony to his guilt, and this is what differentiates him from the unfeeling Montoni. Caleb makes the most overt tribute to Falkland's character and his accomplishment, and this is unaltered even after Falkland obstinately pursued

and persecuted Caleb for unjustifiable reasons: "I proclaim to all the world that Falkland is a man worthy of affection and kindness, and that I am myself the basest and most odious of mankind!" (*CW* 323)

Caleb's eulogising of Falkland does call into question Godwin's attitude towards sentimentalism, as some critics equate the former's love for the latter with that for the father and the God. Storch argues that the novel is a Calvinistic study of the psychology of rebelliousness and the guilt it entails.¹²⁹ Given that the core interest in Godwin's study of minds lies in his obsession with guilt,¹³⁰ we are made to wonder with whose guilt it is that we are to sympathise. Godwin celebrates the inquisitive mind's search for truth. His notion of a true character is always towards the exoneration of "misrepresentation" (*CW* 112), and this he says is only achieved with curiosity and passion. Caleb's curiosity, which is never satiated, trails Falkland's guilty conscience. In other words, Caleb successfully finds where the true character of Falkland lies, namely in his private room. However Godwin makes him call this incessant pursuit of truth "a mistaken thirst of knowledge" (*CW* 133), clearly a negative statement. Caleb's guilt at being "a cool, deliberate, unfeeling murderer" (*CW* 323) of Falkland by exposing the truth in court, therefore, reproaches Godwin's own discourse of reason. What triumphs in the end is not adamant truth for which Caleb so infinitely yearned, but that which contradicts his conviction.

As Pollin cogently points out, "there is irony in the situation; Godwin, the cold rationalist, is now to be attacked for advocating too much feeling."¹³¹ By having

¹²⁹ This annotation is a reference made in Marilyn Butler's article, "Godwin, Burke, and Caleb Williams" in *Essays in Criticism*. vol.32 (1982), p.240.

¹³⁰ George Sherburn, "Godwin's later novels" in *Studies in Romanticism* vol.1 (1962), p.82.

¹³¹ Burton Ralph Pollin (1962), p.221.

recourse to the current practices of his day in using the language and the character type typical of the sensibility movement, his doctrine ends up straddling reason and feeling. Thus Godwin whose rationalist theory depends on one's ability to extricate oneself from the chain of association loses his point of departure. Is it possible for the "sense of independence" or reason to rise above spontaneous feelings or passions? Caleb was deprived of "Sympathy, the magnetic virtue, the hidden essence of our life" (*CW* 308), when cut off from the friendship of mankind. Inability to communicate the truth to Laura and Mr Collins meant, for Caleb, "solitude, separation, banishment" (*CW* 303). Caleb's predicament started off as his pursuit of independent truth, but stumbled on his realisation that what truly counts is not an individual's knowledge of truth but its communication to another: "The pride of philosophy has taught us to treat man as an individual. He is no such thing. He holds, necessarily, indispensably, to his species. He is like those twin-births, that have two heads indeed, and four hands; but, if you attempt to detach them from each other, they are inevitably subjected to miserable and lingering destruction" (*CW* 303).

Caleb Williams, written immediately after *Political Justice*, shares the same political ideas and theoretical basis of the earlier work. Godwinian sensibility draws upon the sentimental notion of sensitivity, and Mr. Falkland is portrayed as a character of feeling. A person of acute sensibility, however, in Godwinian terms, is inclined to "tremble" or be swayed by his vibration or emotions triggered by both external and internal impressions. What constitutes virtue, benevolence and truth becomes elusive by Caleb's feeling of guilt of accusing Falkland's incoherent "character." Although, by showing Caleb's unrelenting will and motive in the tale of perseverance, Godwin attest to the immutable truth (*PJ* 117), Godwin's own sensibility is torn in two when this his

protagonist Caleb cannot make his truth claim “immutable” to all the spectators without his emotional appeal.

3

**'Machine of the human life'
in William Godwin's *St. Leon***

The Enlightenment which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines.¹³²

The machine of human life, though constituted of a thousand parts, is in all its parts regularly and systematically connected; nor is it easy to insert an additional member, the spuriousness of which an accurate observation will not readily detect. How was I to assign a source of my wealth different from the true, which would not be liable to investigation, and, when investigated, would not be seen to be counterfeit?¹³³

In *Caleb Williams* Godwin shows how the mind is chained to the feelings triggered by various impressions. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, he is acutely aware of the links that the nerve system makes between interior and exterior associations. Godwin's perennial interest in "physicalized" associationism also formed the centrepiece of *St. Leon* (1799). In *St. Leon* we can see that he is increasingly focused on the chronological or predictive aspect of associationism, the "machine of human life" whose parts are all "regularly and systematically connected." This scientific phraseology suggests the treat-life-as-an-experiment attitude recommended by Hume.

All our reasonings concerning the probability of causes are founded on the

¹³² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), p.222.

¹³³ William Godwin, *St Leon* ed. Pamela Clemit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp.198, 199. Henceafter cited as *SL* with page numbers in parentheses.

transferring of past to future. The transferring of any past experiment to the future is sufficient to give us a view of the object; whether that experiment be single, or combin'd with others of the same kind; whether it be entire, or oppos'd by others of a contrary kind. (*HN* 137, 138)

Ann Jessie Van Sant presents Hume as an experimenter of human nature, and states that this tendency is not just his idiosyncrasy, but should be seen as part of a wider, cultural pattern of experimentation.¹³⁴ Although Hume conceives the notion of experience as a means for experiment on conjectural or probable reasonings based on the past, he is hesitant to accept that past experience produces “any belief or assurance” for the future. He maintains, “[o]ur past experience presents no determinate object; and as our belief, however faint, fixes itself on a determinate object, ’tis evident that the belief arises not merely from the transference of past to future, but from some operation of the fancy conjoin’d with it” (*HN* 140).

The pivotal question is, to what extent does Godwin allow this philosophical question to dominate the narrative of *St. Leon*. Does it assume the status of a literary experiment in the study of the mind? The novel is based on a Gothic plot where the hero and narrator, Reginald St. Leon, is endowed with immortality and a supernatural power that produces unbounded wealth. The nascent concept of the “machine of human life” is already developed in *Caleb Williams*, but Godwin “steer[s] clear of the supernatural”¹³⁵ in his first novel, for Caleb’s capacity for “foresight” and estimating “probability” was predicated on tracing the “natural” process of a lawful necessity that enables him to

¹³⁴ Ann Jessie Van Sant presents Boswell as an experimenter also, combining “scientific curiosity and romantic imagination.” See *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Sense in Social Context*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.54-56.

¹³⁵ B.J.Tysdahl, (1981), p.84.

judge Falkland's coherence in his conduct. Godwin has shown how Falkland's sudden change alerts Caleb to a certain doubt about the truthfulness of his character. Therefore there is an aspect in the super-natural theme used in *St. Leon* that belies the commonsensical reasoning on which Godwin's philosophy of justice depends. As Tysdahl has pointed out, "there is absolutely no short-cut to truth through metaphysical revelations" using Gothic themes, and Godwin also argues that such a technique may be inadequate for demonstrating truth based on the rationalist principles described in *Political Justice*.

This is not to say that *St. Leon* lacks the authenticity of Caleb's narrative. In fact *St. Leon* strongly asserts the truthfulness of his tale: "I have laid it down to myself in this narrative as a sacred principle, to relate the simple, unaltered truth" (*SL* 30). In *St. Leon*, therefore, the role of the narrator is to stitch together the incongruous Gothic elements, while providing a gap between himself and the commonsensical others who view him as a deviant or "monster" (*SL* 211). Moreover, this technique of allowing supernatural powers to the protagonist does show some different points about Godwin's experiment on the operation of the mind, which is strongly reflected in the way *St. Leon* accumulates his memory through a long history of his life.

Even though Godwin's idea of the integrity of a character is based on a "mechanical" concept of life, he also equates a person's "frailty" with the mechanical metaphor of the body. This theme runs through not only *St. Leon* but his later novel, *Fleetwood* (1805);¹³⁶ and both novels are concerned with the weakness of the human mind which inhibits the formation of a virtuous character.¹³⁷ Godwin's ambivalence lies

¹³⁶ William Godwin, *Fleetwood: Or the Man of Feeling* (London: William Pickering, 1992). Henthforth cited as *FW* with page numbers in parentheses.

¹³⁷ While the dominant sensibility of *St. Leon* is Gothic, which foreshadows Mary

in the usage of the word “machine.” The truthfulness of St. Leon’s story depends on the rational account that faithfully describes the logical progression of the law of nature. This machine implies that one part of human history is tightly knit with other parts, giving reliability to its story, though his narrative is disbelieved precisely because his power is beyond the comprehension of the general public.

Ironically, the same mechanistic image is used to portray the unreliable or passive nature of habits such as gambling or desire for luxury and splendour, and these are depicted as if they were a disease. This latter meaning is reminiscent of the rhetoric used by an eighteenth-century medical man, Robert Jones, who perceives the human body as being unpredictable and subject to various external influences.

The human machine was nothing in itself, but in constant and momentary dependence upon a number of powers, perfectly distinct from it, the operation of which was necessary to its existence.¹³⁸

It is because the body is analogised to a machine that the notion of self becomes philosophically problematic for Godwin, as I have discussed in the first chapter. There was a widespread consensus about the logical progression (from healthy state to diseased condition) that could be explained by the laws of nature, and their application to moral philosophy generated doubts about a regular succession of causes and effects in life. Is the life of an animate being simply sustained or “forced” into actions by

Shelley’s production of *Frankenstein, Fleetwood* is closer to the Romantic exploration and description of the emotive self. Gary Kelly uses Wordsworth’s ‘Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree’ in drawing the parallel between the this novel and Romantic poetry. Wordsworth’s solitary wanderer inhabits the same site, the English Lakes, visited by Fleetwood in his misanthropic wanderings, and where he meets his future wife. See Gary Kelly’s *The English Jacobin Novel 1780-1805*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p.241.

¹³⁸ Robert Jones, *An inquiry into the state of medicine, on the principles of inductive philosophy; with an appendix containing cases and observations*, (Edinburgh, T.Longman and T. Cadell, London, C. Elliott, 1781), p.92.

various stimuli, and hence no different from its inanimate counterpart? Hume's scepticism arises from this perception of a self that is made up of external stimuli, and the same mechanistic image perhaps throws some light on Reid's commitment to the opposite view that accepts the independence of human will from its mechanism.

There is an interlocking relationship between the way in which Godwin portrays the diseased body and the self in this novel. In this chapter, I want to set a theoretical framework for Godwin's rationalism as celebrating "maturity"—the end-product being *St. Leon*—and later show how the narrative disrupts its principle from within. I will explore how the mechanistic way of thinking about habits in medical discourse penetrated the philosophical notion of the self and the principles of human action, causing such disruption. I approach Godwin's *St. Leon* as a historical echo of the medical engagement that can be observed in the works of Samuel-Auguste-Andre-David Tissot, chiefly *Essay on the Disorders of People of Fashion*,¹³⁹ and Thomas Trotter's *An Essay, Medical Philosophical, and Chemical, on Drunkenness*.¹⁴⁰

1. Habits as Mechanical Principle

What differentiates Godwin's rationalist position from Hume's scepticism may be that in *Political Justice* Godwin believes in "the perfection of the human character [which] consists in approaching as nearly as possible to the perfectly voluntary state" (*PJ* 127),

¹³⁹ S.A. Tissot, *An Essay on the Disorders of People of Fashion; and a Treatise on the Diseases Incident to Literary and Sedentary Persons*. Translated From the last French Edition: By a Physician (Edinburgh, 1772). Henceafter cited as *ED* with page numbers in parentheses.

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Trotter, *An Essay, Medical, Philosophical, and Chemical, on Drunkenness, and Its Effects on the Human Body*. (London, 1804). Henceafter cited as *Drunkenness* with page numbers in parentheses.

and he looks upon the maturing of the mind as gradually enabling the rational principles of action to discipline the mechanical principles of the body. In this respect the story of St. Leon who is endowed with an infinite length of life would testify to or contradict Godwin's theoretical conjecture by hypothetically creating an immortal who outlives ordinary human beings. Godwin's theoretical approach has much more resonance with Thomas Reid's theory than with Hume's. In his *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, which emphasises the sequential aspect of the self and its predictive ability to perceive and determine one's future from past experiences, Reid salvages the self from the law of mechanism. Godwin similarly weighs voluntary will against "mechanical" actions, and also associates foresight with voluntary action. The principal philosophical question here is whether the self is able to rise above its mechanical actions, which Reid calls "habits" or "custom," or is left to bury itself under their forces.

Amongst Reid's three categories or principles of human action (*APM* 544), "mechanical," "animal" and "rational,"¹⁴¹ Godwin's idea of habits takes the "mechanical principle" as its point of departure. This is explained more or less by Hartleyan associationism, to which Godwinian theory was much indebted, despite his hostility to it. The mechanical principles of action, which are reduced to two kinds, "instinct" and "habits" (*APM* 545), Reid says, produce their effect without any will or intention (*APM* 579). By contrast, the rational principles of action are the leading and governing principles "to which all our animal principles are subordinate, and to which they ought to be subject." What is unique about us as human beings is, Reid argues, that "as we grow up to understanding" we are able to "reflect upon what is past, and, by the

¹⁴¹ Although "animal" principles of action have "some particular and present object," unlike instinct or habits, it "looks not beyond that object to its consequences, or to the connections it may have with other things" (*APM* 580).

lamp of experience, discern what will probably happen in time to come" (*APM* 580). This theoretical framework has a deep resonance with Godwin's theory of perfectible human nature.

According to Reid, "Self seems to be Strictly connected with Memory." Upon this memory, all the "Successive Ideas are *Strung* as it were in order." These ideas, Reid argues, can be classed and divided, hence drawing the conclusion that the self or "Consciousness," which ties these into one and gives them unity, has to exist.¹⁴² Ideas are compared to a sheaf of threads, or a pile of garments, strung or knit together by something called "self." In giving an account of the connection between an external object and the sensation arising from the sense of smelling, Reid stresses the importance of "experience" which enables a subject to discover that the nose is the organ of the sense of smelling and that the air is a medium of it: "he finds a connection in nature betwixt the rose and this sensation" and the experience and the rose are associated in the mind and "consequently found conjoined in the imagination" (*Inquiry* 39).

There is a corresponding idea expressed by Godwin, that everything has to be connected in the mind. In *Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature* (1797), he closely observes the relationship between trivial occurrences of everyday life and our character.

Everything in the phenomena of the human mind is *connected* together...every incident of our lives contributes to form our temper our character and our understanding; and the mass thus formed modifies every one of our actions.

¹⁴² For Reid's theory of the self, see his essay "On the self" dated 22 October, 1748. In *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp.316-318. Italics added.

All in man is association and habit.¹⁴³

Godwin establishes a mode that promotes a social understanding of the self that is ever improving, if not degrading, as a result of its exposure to the repeated action or inaction of the sensory organs. How then does Godwin deploy this mode in *St. Leon*? Habitual or customary connections made in the mind, he believes, are inevitable consequences of carrying out a life in society. Just as Rousseau took his environment seriously in his autobiography, *The Confessions*, Godwin studied the relationship between self and its environment with a curious eye. According to him, it is impossible for a man to be “wholly uninfluenced by education and early habits” and to be “independent of his parents, his companions, his age and his country” (*Enquirer* 212). In other words, it is not merely a compound of ideas stored in the mind, but the social circle and the whole environment that the self carries.

In order to make his point, Godwin imagines a situation in which a man undergoes a change of opinion. Rather than giving a simple answer to why the change in inclination was brought about by “a new accession of evidence,” he gives more than one possibility, and shows how complex human beings are, or how the self is intermingled with multitudes of influences.

I was of one opinion in January, and am of another in June. If I gain a pension, or a rich church-living by the change, this circumstance may well be supposed to have some weight with / me. . . . Perhaps I am influenced by an apprehension of something beautiful, generous and becoming in the sentiment to be embraced, instead of being under the mere influence of argument

¹⁴³ William Godwin, *The Enquirer. Reflections on Education and Manners, and Literature*. in *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*. vol.5. ed. Pamela Clemit (London: William Pickering, 1993), p.215. Italics added. Hereafter cited as

(*Enquirer* 214).

What we can observe in *St. Leon* and also *Fleetwood* is the setting of various situations, mostly concerning the forfeiture or possession of wealth, which gives Godwin opportunity to analyse how the mind and its established propensities adjust to such situations. Godwin's interest in this experiment is actually foretold in *Enquirer*: "It would constitute perhaps the most curious / chapter in the history of the human mind, if any person sufficiently competent to the task, were to undertake to detect the various causes which generate change of opinion among men" (*Enquirer* 214). We can say that his application of these philosophical principles to fictional characters in *St. Leon* takes a peculiar turn. The protagonist's independence from society is rather exaggerated in the novel, and his rationalism brings about misunderstanding and misery and not happiness to the people involved.

The narrative strategy used is that the old St. Leon, who has lived long enough to reflect on his own life as a "historian" (*SL* 23), distances himself from the younger self, which gives him authoritative power to judge or rectify his past conduct. "In what I have already written," he writes, "I felt myself prompted to enlarge with complacency upon the sentiments and scenes of my youth" (*SL* 27). He attempts the justification of his "infatuation" with heroism and the power of wealth (*SL* 27). The older self realises that his early education inspired him with "a proud and restless desire of distinction" that brought him to his ruin. The paradox is that the narrator's memory consists of his own past perceptions, and that he is still a continuation of his earlier self.

2. The Love of Splendour

Enquirer with page numbers in parentheses.

Let us now look at the way in which St. Leon's obsession with wealth is pathologically portrayed in the novel. In *St. Leon*, wealth is given a special consideration in relation to its effect upon habits and custom. It is meaningful not just as a marker of social distinction, but as an emblem of the protagonist's alchemical power which he later acquires from a stranger. Riches are given further emphasis by Godwin's firstly introducing St. Leon as a descendant of "one of the most ancient and honourable families of the kingdom of France" (*SL* 3). Secondly his mother's teaching is given considerable weight. His obsession with nobility and honour was spurred on by his mother's encouragement. Her last words to his son are;

. . . I trust your education has not been of that sort which is calculated to render a young man helpless and contemptible. You have been taught to know your rank in society, and to respect yourself. You have been instructed in every thing that might most effectually forward you in the career of glory. (*SL* 8-9)

Thus his early education teaches him the "prejudices of nobility and magnificence" and the chivalrous virtues. With regard to the idea of wealth, Godwin's aim in this volume seems investigative rather than polemical, though to him there is nothing more pernicious to the human mind than the love of "lavish splendour" (*SL* 5). His definition of "splendour" seems to be rather broad, encompassing the notion of wealth and heroic appearance. Even in his *Political Justice* there is a passage that hints at the weakness of the human mind against the allurements of wealth.

Wealth, by the sentiments of servility and dependence it produces, makes the rich man stand forward as the principal object of general esteem and deference. In vain are sobriety, integrity and industry, in vain the sublimest powers of mind, and the most ardent benevolence, if their possessor be narrow in his

circumstances. (*PJ* 727)

Is wealth so powerful an influence as to outdo the “sublimest powers of mind”? The first circumstance that has a great impact on the youthful mind of St. Leon is a splendid scene of the meeting between Francis the First and Henry the Eighth (*SL* 4), and what is relevant here is his attraction to the “splendour of dress” that was worn by them upon this occasion (*SL* 5) and to the “variety of garments” (*SL* 5). The riveting scene continues with the display of “the beauty of armour, the caparisons of the steeds, the mettle of the animals themselves, and the ardour and grace of the combatants” (*SL* 6). St. Leon says that he possessed passion for “the theatre of glory,” which was accentuated by his being prevented from immediately serving the King.

Next comes his “military passion” (*SL* 24) awakened by the battle of Pavia, which makes him feel “roused upon this glorious occasion” (*SL* 21), and this elation of heart gives him “something indescribably delicious in this concentration of the mind” (*SL* 22). However the defeat of Pavia, according to St. Leon, has given a “deadly wound to the reign of chivalry,” which leaves him in solitude, without an advisor or a guide (*SL* 26). Godwin emphasises that the protagonist is, after this incident, “wholly guided by the suggestion of [his] own mind” (*SL* 26), which eventually leads to a disastrous state. The lack of guardianship is also represented as a problem in *Fleetwood*, for Godwin repeatedly stresses the imperfection of youth. When Fleetwood is removed to the University of Oxford from his Merionethshire home, separated from his own father, he sees that “the situation was altogether new” (*FW* 29). He becomes “vicious by the operation of a populous and crowded residence . . . , unwarned by experience against the rocks that awaited him” (*FW* 46). Youth is presented as possessing only “imperfect reason,” for, “when flushed with convivial gaiety and high spirits, tramples without

remorse, and unhesitatingly assures itself that ‘All is well’” (*FW* 45). Similarly, after the battle, St. Leon’s pent-up passions which might be exhausted in the further military pursuit no longer find outlet except in the “indulgences of the table” (*SL* 27), namely, gambling; “the turbulence of a scene of high play alone had power to distract my attention from the storm within” (*SL* 54).

The younger self “mistook profusion and extravagance for splendour and dignity” (*SL* 27), giving a symbolic importance to wealth. He considers the “possession of some degree of wealth” as “indispensable to a man who would fill a lofty and respectable character in the world” (*SL* 28). It is the older St. Leon that acknowledges the vice of gambling:

. . . that concentrated spirit which had sought to expand itself upon the widest stage, now found vent in the exhibition of individual expense: and above all, the sordid and inglorious passion for gaming, a vice eminently characteristic of the age, now especially gained strength, and drew multitudes into its destructive vortex. (*SL* 27)

This habit of gambling went hand in hand with his “splendid and luxurious” living (*SL* 32), draining his resources. The Marquis de Damville’s admonition seems to be a voice coming from Godwin himself. He condemns such a man who “having wasted his goods in riotous living, yet hungers after the luxuries that have proved his bane, and feasts himself upon the steam of dainties of which he has lost the substance” (*SL* 36).

Even though St. Leon’s conduct seems to be severely censured, it is somehow warranted by a lawful necessity or by the inevitable consequences of certain situations. When Godwin depicts the formation of St. Leon’s ignoble habits, the protagonist is often portrayed as being “led into” these vices (*SL* 32). It is Tissot, the Swiss physician,

who famously warns of the danger of certain habits. He advises the rich and the upper class people on matters of health, morality and lifestyle, based on the assumption that diseases are formed by constitution and by habit. He says that the situation of a man “in high life” has “continually before his eyes, and in his imagination, a variety of objects that keep him in continual agitation” (ED 22).

The ambition of honour, the love of titles, the desire of possessing such a fortune as luxury renders necessary, are three principles that incessantly animate the man in high life, keeping his soul in continual agitation, which alone would be enough to destroy his health; frequently exposed to a reverse of fortune, to mortifications, to sorrows, to humiliations, to rage, to vexations, which continually imbitter his moments. . . . (ED 23)

Likewise, St. Leon who has continually been exposed to the display of luxury is “kept in a state of preternatural agitation by the passions of a gamester” (SL 49). The deeper associations are fixed in his mind, the more difficult they are to erode, and his mother’s teaching seems to have had an unfading influence on him.

Against the evil of these habits, Godwin takes a diagnostic approach, thereby censuring the mechanical body that is drawn into addictive behaviour. In some ways, this reminds us of the contemporary medical engagement in the rehabilitation of social ills such as drunkenness. In his *An Essay, Medical Philosophical, and Chemical, on Drunkenness*, Thomas Trotter states that the habit of drunkenness is “a disease of the mind” (*Drunkenness* 172). Like Tissot, Trotter advises a physician to examine the symptoms as well as to “scrutinize the character of his patient, his pursuits, his modes of living, his very passions and private affairs” (ibid) so as to locate the cause. This rhetorical programme, designed to awaken the reader to the dangers which are incurred

through dissipation and unnatural living habits, was a characteristic trait that links Trotter to the sociological approach of the contemporary medical interest in systematically promoting the health of the general public and also to the eighteenth-century philosophical tradition. Removing such tenacious habits is considered difficult because “the physical influence of custom, confirmed into habit” is “interwoven with the actions of our sentient system” (*Drunkenness* 3). St. Leon’s idea of “habits” reverberates with this statement, as he maintains:

There are habits of the mind and modes of occupying the attention, in which when once we have engaged, there seems a sort of physical impossibility of ever withdrawing ourselves. This was my case in the present instance. My habit was of no long standing. But no reading of my story, no mere power of language and words, can enable a by-stander to imagine how deep it was sunk into my heart, how inextricably it was twisted with all the fibres of my bosom. (SL 258)

Godwin here takes particular care to show that habits are embedded in the physicality of the body. We are led to understand that the “fibres” of the bosom which are directly connected with the habits and their mechanical operation are no less physical than the nervous fibres which are sensible to basic human cravings such as hunger or thirst.

According to Trotter, “A due acquaintance with the human character will afford much assistance” in finding out whether the propensity to the vicious habit of drinking springs “from situation in life, or depended on any peculiar temperament of body” (*Drunkenness* 4). In St. Leon’s case, his love of gambling appears to emanate from both his temperament, that is the “obstinacy of rooted propensities,” and the “seduction of long established habits” (SL 52). In *St. Leon* as well as in *Fleetwood*, Godwin’s prime

subjects are “nervous people” whose “tempers are fickle, their spirits unequal, and their attachments equivocal.” Trotter has notably described nervous people as having a “wavering and capricious principle of action.”¹⁴⁴ The young St. Leon can be categorised as “nervous” in the contemporary medical sense, for he is portrayed as passionate, temperamental and emotionally unstable. His body is a diseased body, for he likens himself to “a pestilential wind.” The wind “breathe[s] blast to the fruits of nature, and sickness to its aspect” (SL 85). It is interesting to see that there is an implicit longing for “maturity” in the way he compares himself with his friends. His Parisian friends are described as ideally “matured and improved by the silent influence of time” (SL 48), whereas he remains “impetuous, volatile, and dissipated” (SL 49), a character unbecoming to his age. Perhaps maturity, which Godwin perceived as a state of having learned from past experiences, would quell the dangerous passions that caused nervous agitation.

When Damville urges St. Leon towards “reformation” (SL 34), warning that his habits are “the most dangerous sort” (SL 35), he encourages him to change not only his habits, but also his “situation” (SL 37). He then offers his daughter to let him experience the “gratifications that attend upon domestic affections” (SL 37). On the condition that St. Leon retires into the country with Marguerite, Damville gives St. Leon permission to marry her.

I have one condition, however, to stipulate with you. I require of you, as the pledge of her happiness, that you break off your present modes of life; that you separate yourself from your *connections*, and retire into the country upon your

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Trotter, *A View of the Nervous Temperament: Being a Practical Enquiry into the Increasing Prevalence . . . of Those Diseases Commonly Called Nervous* (London, 1807), p.163. Hereafter cited as *VNT* with page numbers in parentheses.

paternal estate. (*SL* 37, italics added)

Cutting himself from his “connections” is the only way, Damville believes, St. Leon can escape the “tyranny of custom” (*SL* 37). It is highly likely that Godwin viewed a person’s removal from the metropolis as contributing to a change in habits.

Speculation concerning the physical consequences of living in the metropolis as opposed to the provinces is evident in Godwin’s other works. When we turn to his later fiction *Fleetwood* the contrast is more impressively made. The protagonist’s “rude check put upon [his] excesses” of passions, he says, is because he was in Paris. He states, “I was in Paris, and I did as people of fashion in Paris were accustomed to do” (*FW* 60). The time he spent in Oxford and Paris, he confesses, was a period of “inebriety” or intoxication (*FW* 74). In Paris Fleetwood’s sexual feelings were incited, and this licentiousness lasting no less than five years laid “the foundation in [him], deep and broad, for a dissolute character.”

The impressions of my adventures of gallantry in France I cannot overcome. Perhaps, in the tranquillity of sober discussion, you might bring me to confess that these impressions are unjust; but there they are; such are the associations of my mind (*FW* 166)

Ruffigny’s narrative about his misfortune and the good deeds of Fleetwood’s family has a certain “purifying effect” (*FW* 128) and brings shame on Fleetwood’s inclination towards dissipation. However, when he moves into London, he cannot suppress his newly emerging infatuation, weakening the resolution that he makes during his stay in Switzerland. It seems to me that change of places, for Godwin, was a crucial factor in shaping and reshaping a character.

Therefore it is convincing that St. Leon is temporarily relieved from his

“loathsome diseases” (*SL* 80) of luxury when he retires into the country. St. Leon’s marriage to the virtuous Marguerite, together with their change in style of life, is presented as a possible cure for his disease: “Marguerite could, and ought, by insensible degrees, to have rooted out this disease of my mind” (*SL* 42). In the pastoral scenes of their abode, St. Leon finds relief by observing the beauties of nature, and experiences most exquisite sensibility in the “contemplation of verdure and fertility, and industry and simplicity and cheerfulness” (*SL* 41), through which “[the mind] trembles with pleasure through every fibre and every articulation” (*SL* 42). The emphasis is again put on the physicality of the body through which he acquires this new habit of life, though it does not last long enough to sink into his character.

St. Leon was not formed to enjoy a scene of pastoral simplicity, for “ambition still haunts him” (*SL* 177). While he suffers from “the obstinacy of [his] malady” (*SL* 85), a desire to carry out masculine pursuits to earn distinction, Marguerite, who celebrates the “romantic scenes of nature” and sees “the cultivators of the fields and the vineyards” as her “brethren,” represents the realm of nature (*SL* 85). Marguerite considers living in the country as most “natural,” rejecting St. Leon’s “visionary pursuits” as not “flow[ing] in a direct line from any of the genuine principles of our nature” (*ibid.*). He breaches his promise with Damville “to live in the midst of [his] family” (*SL* 48), leaving this pastoral scenes, and returns to Paris to provide his son, Charles, a decent schooling. There, he is drawn back to his previous habits. We detect in him a certain feeling of resignation: “There seemed to be something in my habits, whether of inattention, ostentation, or inconsistency, that baffled the strongest motives by which parsimony and frugality can be enforced” (*SL* 53). His voluntary will even to write to his wife fails him, as he states,

When my insane project of supplying the inadequateness of my fortune by this expedient [gambling] began to produce an effect exactly opposite, I could not, but with the extremest difficulty, *string my mind* to write to the mistress of my soul. (SL 60, italics added)

The way Godwin expresses “to make myself write” is thus interestingly replaced by the words “to string my mind to write,” signifying that, in a Reidian sense, his rational capacity to bind ideas with a string to enable him to control them is at this point ineffectual. St. Leon’s body is represented as a “mere instrument” or a machine to be “played upon” by endless anxieties and constant agitation (SL 55). St. Leon’s mechanical body is at the same time a diseased body, facing a philosophical dilemma from which there is no escape, unless he contrives to form a firm voluntary will.

3. Paradox of Disease

The discussion of the representation of the diseased body in the eighteenth century would not be complete without addressing the differences in gender. Thomas Laqueur has characterised eighteenth-century writings, particularly by women, as committed to “passionlessness,” but this denial or devaluation of specifically female passion in women’s writings such as that by Anna Wheeler or Mary Wollstonecraft is part of a general devaluation of passion in this period.¹⁴⁵ This becomes a key element in understanding not only Godwin’s human ideal, but also the reason for his peculiar way

¹⁴⁵ Laqueur takes the term “passionlessness” and an understanding of its political meaning in the early nineteenth century from Nancy Cott’s article “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790-1859,” *Signs* 4, no. 21 (1978): pp.219-36. See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 200, 201. See also Laqueur, “Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology” in *Representations* 14 (1986), p.24.

of depicting Marguerite. Knowing that Godwin drew Marguerite after the model of his wife, Holcroft wrote to Godwin and said that his “heart ached while [he] read it.”¹⁴⁶ It is fascinating that Godwin has portrayed his heroine, who allegedly resembles Wollstonecraft, as displaying uncommon fortitude that even puts the protagonist himself to shame.

Interestingly in *St. Leon* as well as in *Frankenstein*,¹⁴⁷ women who are circumscribed by men’s overreaching acts misconstrue men’s passions as sexually inspired. Because of the protracted silence of her man, Marguerite suspects that “the attractions of some beauty in the metropolis” has made St. Leon indifferent to the affairs of his family (*SL* 61). Elizabeth in *Frankenstein* also thinks that her fiancé is having a clandestine affair, though he is in fact engaged in a scientific experiment on life. It may be no coincidence that some modern critics have interpreted Victor’s “filthy creation” (*Frankenstein* 36) as an obscene act. David Musselwhite maintains that the features described in the process of creation resemble or fit that of masturbation, for the overall mood, he says, is “one of guilty addiction, tremendous secrecy and isolation.”¹⁴⁸ This image would be considered far-fetched, if there were no historical evidence to connect male obsession with self-pollution. However Tissot, the author of *Essay on the Disorders of People of Fashion*, has furnished us with a valuable insight. He has metaphorised male solitary pursuits or fixation on a “single question” as an act of

¹⁴⁶ William St. Clair, (1989), p.211.

¹⁴⁷ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) ed. Marilyn Butler (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Unless specifically written, the 1818 edition is used throughout this thesis.

¹⁴⁸ David Musselwhite, *Parting Welded Together: Politics and Desire in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*, (London: Methuen, 1987), p.64. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued that Victor’s creation is “filthy” because it is “obscenely sexual.” They refer to the meaning of “obscenity” and “moral defilement” recorded in the *OED*. See *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p.232.

“onanism.” He explains how excess in passions, whether in intellectual pursuits, in worldly pleasure, or in sexuality, is guilty because it abuses the body. When St. Leon “entreat[s] the reader to consider what are the most imperious passions of the human mind” and answers that “[t]hey have rudely been described to be wealth, power, and pleasurable sensation” (SL 258), we cannot help acknowledging the similarity with a passage in Tissot’s major medical treatise, *Onanism* (1766).

The masturbator, entirely devoted to his filthy meditations, is subject to the same disorders as the man of letters, who fixes his attention on a single question; and this excess is almost constantly prejudicial. That part of the brain, which is then occupied, makes an effort similar to that of a muscle, which has been for a long time greatly extended; the consequences of which are such a continued motion in the parts as cannot be stopt [sic], or such a fixed attention, that the idea cannot be changed . . . Although exhausted by perpetual fatigue, [these masturbators] are seized with all the disorders incident to the brain, melancholy, catalepsy, epilepsy, imbecility, the loss of sensation, weakness of the nervous system, and a variety of similar disorders.¹⁴⁹

Tissot’s medical treatise, therefore, moralises about certain types of people who, like masturbators, are deeply addicted to their pursuits. Victor, for example, “is engaged, heart and soul, in one pursuit.” It is equally significant that he calls this enthrallment “my old habits” (*Frankenstein* 36). Similarly St. Leon cannot discontinue the use of the alchemical power once acquired, as he states, “I could not resolve to renounce donations which I had so dearly appropriated” (SL 200). He knows that the gifts are “accursed”

¹⁴⁹ S. A. Tissot, *Onanism, or A Treatise upon the Disorders Produced by Masturbation, or The Dangerous Effects of Secret and Excessive Venery* trans. A. Hume, M.D. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985), p.75.

and only give him “burden” and “stain” (SL 84), but he refuses to surrender them. Just as Victor’s scientific pursuit carries a deeply sexual connotation of guilt, so St. Leon is conscious of his guilt in receiving the gifts of immortality and inexhaustible wealth from the alchemist: “I felt like a person that was guilty of some crime” (SL 132).

According to Clara Pinto-Correia, Tissot’s undertaking of exploring and characterising all the diseases that accompany “self-pollution” is a “paradigmatic mirror of the movement toward the secularization and medicalization of morality that became one of the trends of the Enlightenment.” It is apt that she makes mention of Vernon Rosario’s words that “not only was onanism the defilement of the temple of the soul, but also of the temple of Nature—the body.”¹⁵⁰ St. Leon’s obsession with acquiring alchemical power could be interpreted as symbolising the transgression of Nature. This is perhaps more illustrative in the case of Victor’s scientific experiment, as he claims, “with unrelaxed and breathless eagerness, I pursued nature to her hiding-places” (*Frankenstein* 36).

In that St. Leon’s supernatural power of producing gold consists of “the composition and decomposition of simples” and “experiments on the nature of substances, chemical and metallic” (SL 258), the process is not, in the strictest sense, magical. He also says his natural magic requires the study of “chemistry” (SL 257). In this respect, therefore, the dichotomous relationship between Nature and science surfaces: just as the creator of the monster circumvents the natural order of things in attaining “life,” so St. Leon eschews Nature in procuring the elixir of life. It is revealing

¹⁵⁰ Vernon A. Rosario II, “Phantastical Pollutions: The Public Threat of Private Vice in France,” in *Solitary Pleasures: The Historical, Literary and Artistic Discourse of Auto-Eroticism*, ed. Paula Bennett and Vernon A. Rosario II, (New York: Routledge, 1995). Quoted by Clara Pinto-Correia. See *The Ovary of Eve: Egg and Sperm and Preformation*, (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1997), p.95.

that in the eighteenth century alchemical procedure or chemical experiment was a potent metaphor for coitus. The chemical analogy used by Erasmus Darwin in explaining the “appetence” of a living being is demonstrative of this.

If I might be indulged to make a simile in a philosophical work, I should say, that the animal appetencies [sic] are not only perhaps less numerous originally than chemical affinities; but that like these latter, they change with every new combination; thus vital air and azote, when combined, produce nitrous acid; which now acquires the property of dissolving silver; so with every new additional part to the embryo, as of the throat or lungs, I suppose a new animal appetency [sic] to be produced. (*Zoonomia* i 499, 500)

However when St. Leon literally bypasses sexual intercourse to produce the “elixir of life,” it ceases to be a metaphor. Scientific method takes the place of natural coitus.¹⁵¹ The alchemical power is therefore symbolic of its masculine/scientific power that is in this novel the major drive for intense passions. Significantly “[t]he first and foremost passions” of St. Leon’s soul (*SL* 126) excited by the stranger signal the beginning of the “estrangement of hearts” between St. Leon and Marguerite. This is a typical situation where male bonding reinforces masculinity at the expense of the feminine.¹⁵²

Here Godwin wrestles for the definition of “effeminacy.” He plays with the word “strength” to illustrate the sign of masculinity (*SL* 136). Initially, St. Leon’s

¹⁵¹ As Paul-Gabriel Boucé has argued, against female reproductive power, seminal fluid had a certain cultural signification in the eighteenth century: “That vital liquor [semen] in most eighteenth-century medical handbooks appears, literally, as an elixir of life, distilled from the choicest blood, and able to cure a variety of female disorders in a wellnigh magic way.” In a sense, St. Leon’s absolute belief in the elixir of life represents male arrogance that boasts of its supremacy over female body. See “Some Sexual Beliefs and Myths in Eighteenth-Century Britain” in *Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain* ed. Paul-Gabriel Boucé (Totowa, New Jersey, Manchester UP, 1982), p.44.

¹⁵² Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History: A Defence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p.132.

strength of mind is displayed by his resolution to refuse the gifts. But as soon as he hears the provocative words of the stranger; “Feeble and effeminate mortal!,” and observes the stranger’s “marks of a vigorous and *masculine* genius “ (SL 141, italics added), St. Leon changes his mind and extols the “passions the operation of which had long been suspended” in his bosom. He condemns his own feebleness in shrinking from such powers, calling his original resolution “uxorious and effeminate” (SL 137). In the end, he completely overturns his resolution about protecting his domestic peace, and discards it as “effeminate.” Furthermore, a mechanical metaphor is yet again used to illustrate the “feeble” body. He fears becoming a “puppet” which is “moved with wires, and to be played on at will” (SL 134) if he remains within the bounds of the domestic sphere.

The stranger’s rhetoric deserves a careful analysis. His persuasion reads like a riddle which draws on an analogy with the alchemical process. How one’s strong will can independently rise above the “feeble” body is no less puzzling than how one manages to extract gold out of ordinary metals. The stranger says that:

the vessel in which it [the talent] was deposited must be purified from the *alloy of human frailty*. It might be abused and applied to the most atrocious designs. It might blind the understanding of the wisest, and corrupt the integrity of the noblest. It might overturn kingdoms, and change the whole order of human society into anarchy and barbarism. (SL 135, italics added)

The stranger has an extreme view of “dependence.” He indiscriminately condemns a “dependence” on the will of others as feeble and effeminate. The process of purification from the “alloy” is in this sense synonymous with total independence, if not alienation, from society. For fear of becoming “corrupted,” an alchemist has to stand aloof from

others even from his family. In addition, seeing St. Leon's insecurity about his failure to become mature, the stranger taunts him about his childishness. He explains that St. Leon is "not yet purged of imbecility and weakness" *because* he is a child: "[t]hough you have passed through much, and had considerable experience, you are yet a child." (SL 136). Maturity seems to be a vital concept in Godwin's rationalism, in that it enables one to secure a relatively independent or voluntary position in making a fair and rational judgment. St. Leon is as it were caught in the rhetoric of the stranger that praises detachment from reality or what Godwin has called the machine of human life, as he says, "[a] man can never be respectable in the eyes of the world or in his own, except so far as he stands by himself and is truly independent" (SL 138). Even in "domestic connections," St. Leon believes that he should not lose his individuality (*ibid.*).

St. Leon's aspiration for independence ironically derives from his dependence on "[t]he gestures of worship and the voice of applause" (SL 42). It is Marguerite who is truly independent, for her happiness is sustained by the tone of her own mind, and "stood in no need of the gaping admiration and stupid wonder of others to make her feel herself happy" (SL 42). Her "fortitude" (SL 72, 73, 83) is not proven by alienating herself from her family or throwing away domestic affections (SL 174).

She proved, in the most convincing manner, that her elevation was not the offspring of wealth or rank, but was properly her own. She gave a grace, even a lustre, to poverty, which it can only receive from the emanations of a cultivated mind. (SL 75)

Independence for her does not mean alienation, but material independence through minimising the need for the material "assistance of others" (SL 85). In terms of empathy, she celebrates interdependence with others, and is tightly connected to St. Leon with

“inviolable attachment” (*SL* 43). The spontaneity of their feelings towards each other is depicted as “the joint result of [their] common affection” (*ibid.*). The emphasis is thus put on their sensibility rather than on actual dialogue when St. Leon tries to prove his innocence. St. Leon’s credibility lies not so much in what he says as in how he conveys his truth claims. About the alleged love affair with another, his facial expression communicates his innocence and clears up the misunderstanding. St. Leon recollects:

It is then only that a man is truly pleased, when pulse replies to pulse, when the eyes discourse eloquently to each other, when in responsive tones and words the soul is communicated. . . . My eyes assured Marguerite of the constancy of my affection my kisses were those of chaste, undivided, entire attachment. (*SL* 63)

The point of most contention is whether the truth conveyed through “the common affection” of two sympathetic subjects is what Godwin endorses in the novel, for it seems to contradict his rationalist claim.

The wholesome and beneficial effect of the sympathetic tie which is represented by Marguerite is favourably depicted throughout the novel. Godwin’s increasing emphasis on sympathy in moral judgements can be attributed to his relationship with Wollstonecraft which was initiated in April 1796. The importance of “domestic affections,” which are defined as “well-regulated affections,” is put forward in her *Rights of Woman* (*VRW* 212). She makes a distinction between such affections and “Natural affections.” While the latter is merely a “very faint tie,” the former grows out of the habitual exercise of a mutual sympathy. Moreover, she advises the reader to carry out the “indispensable duty of men and women to fulfil the duties which give birth to affections” and says that these affections are “the surest preservatives against vice”

(*VRW* 223). Marguerite remains completely untainted by moral vice, because she is free from unhealthy and corrupt passions. Not even her physical disorder saps her intellectual powers or affections for her family. The female “spirit” who is one of the main narrators in Wollstonecraft’s ‘The Cave of Fancy’ represents the ultimate effacing of the body. There is certainly a romanticised element in this representation in *St. Leon*, and Godwin uses the image of a “disembodied spirit” which is unaffected by physical weakness, which was in fact Wollstonecraft’s favourite image of herself.¹⁵³ Marguerite’s enthusiasm is said to be “bright, unclouded and serene”: “It was the eloquence as of a disembodied spirit, freed from the perturbation and alloy of human passions” (*SL* 293). The reverse is true with *St. Leon*. He boasts of his body as being “invulnerable to disease” (*SL* 2), and proudly claims that, for him, “the laws of nature are suspended” (*SL* 163). He nonetheless fails to shun a more fundamental disorder. He is “infected” with another kind of malady, that is, the vices of luxury which are illustrated in Godwin’s *Political Justice*.

Whoever frequents the habitations of the luxurious will speedily be infected with the vices of luxury. The ministers and attendants of a sovereign, accustomed to the trappings of magnificance, will turn with disdain from the merit that is obscured with the clouds of adversity. (*PJ* 447)

Godwin’s sober criticism about the ostentation of splendour in the monarchical system such as the above is not simply a moral censure, but also a medicalisation of a state of mind.

The evils indeed that arise out of avarice, an inordinate admiration of wealth

¹⁵³ This is chiefly observed in her early fictional works such as ‘The Cave of Fancy.’ The notion of “disembodiment” will be discussed in the later chapters.

and an intemperate pursuit of it are so obvious that they have constituted a perpetual topic of lamentation and complaint. The object in this place is to consider how far they are extended and aggravated by a monarchical government, that is, by a constitution the very essence of which is to accumulate enormous wealth upon a single head, and to render the ostentation of splendour the established instrument for securing honour and veneration. (*PJ* 447, 448)

As he calls it “the effeminate softness of favourites” (*ibid.*), effeminacy and vulnerability to such contagion are irrevocably bound together in his imagination. The profoundest irony is that the least likely person to contract any kind of disease in this novel is portrayed as most susceptible and effeminate. This makes for a curious paradox.

4. Godwin's Futuristic Vision

The use of the disease motif in the novel is directly linked to the more general epistemological breakdown of the social tie. Initially St. Leon believed that the supernatural gifts would empower him to “suspend” or supersede the law of nature, but later he realises that the law of nature that lends credence to one's story is in fact “the prime source of individual security in human affairs.” In other words, the only thing that saves a person from “the most injurious suspicions” (*SL* 199) is to be part of “the chain and combination of events, that proceeds systematically from link to link” (*SL* 228). When St. Leon receives the gifts from the stranger, he cannot anticipate the inevitable consequence of “suspending” the law of nature. He does not realise that to be endowed with supernatural power signifies having a different standard of morality, so he

subsequently loses his equals. Victor's creature is similarly an outcast who is called a "wretch" (*Frankenstein* 40). It was to gain another of the "same species" that the monster asks Victor for his companion (*Frankenstein* 118). Marguerite's remonstrance foreshadows the monster's narrative in *Frankenstein*.

Equality is the soul of real and cordial society. A man of rank indeed does not live upon equal terms with the whole of his species; but his heart also can exult, for he has his equals. How unhappy the *wretch*, the monster rather let me say, who is without an equal. (*SL* 211, italics added)

Godwin's choice of words such as "monster" manifests his strong conviction that society barely functions without sympathising equals.¹⁵⁴ The theme of "connection" is explored not only in relation to a historical aspect of the self, but to the links that society makes with the interest of each individual. Because St. Leon's source of wealth remains a secret, there is no way to explain his sudden wealth, and the criminal charge of robbery and murder of the stranger against him cannot be lifted. People are connected with each other both in time and space, and Godwin demonstrates this by observing how the unnatural procedure of events arouses suspicion. Marguerite warns her husband that the transition cannot be so easily made as he hopes, for it is wrong to think "the world is inattentive to the actions of men or their circumstances" (*SL* 175). Just like the inquisitive Caleb in Godwin's first novel, every neighbour is "vested with a sort of inquisitorial power" (*SL* 171) which functions as a check to the natural "chain of circumstances" (*SL* 231). As Godwin states,

Man is a social being. In society the interests of individuals are intertwined with each other, and cannot be separated. Men should be taught to assist each

¹⁵⁴ St. Leon reiterates this word, "monster" to describe himself (*SL* 363).

other. (*Enquirer* 83)

It proclaims the impossibility of man's total independence from society. The only anomaly presented in the novel is the invincible misanthrope, Bethlem Gabor, who "ha[s] vowed vengeance against the whole human race" (*SL* 400). Like St. Leon, Gabor remains outside of society. Peculiarly, the protagonist feels himself attached to him, though he does not feel "sympathised with him [Gabor]" (*SL* 397). His admiration for Gabor resembles his idealisation of the "masculine genius" possessed by the stranger. St. Leon describes Gabor as "a man of iron," characterising him as too "colossal a structure to be accessible to human feelings and human affections" (*SL* 397). It is therefore perfectly natural that there emerges a deep chasm between these men. As Gabor announces, St. Leon's character is "of all beings the most opposite to that of Bethlem Gabor" (*SL* 416). Two people who are either determined or destined to be "independent" from the world cannot find ways to reconcile their interests. Paradoxically, only when St. Leon commiserates with Gabor on their complete alienation from society can he be acknowledged by Gabor as his friend.

Gabor's cold-blooded act of imprisoning his friend and benefactor, St. Leon, can be construed as proof of evil inclination which only inspires in us a feeling of scorn. Gabor is, however, an equivocal character. It must be noted that there is truth in his moral statement.

Instead of, like me, seeking occasions of glorious mischief and vengeance, you took upon yourself to be the benefactor and parent of mankind. What vocation had you to the task? With the spirit of a slave who, the more he is beaten, becomes the more servile and submissive, you remunerated injuries with benefits. . . . Poor, soulless poltroon! to say the best of you, to your insensate

heart it was the same whether you were treated with reverence or scorn. I saw you hunted, hooted at, and pursued by the people you fed; you held on your course, and fed them still. (*SL* 416)

When St. Leon schemes a grand project for stimulating and reviving the economy of Hungary with his wealth, his intention seems purely benevolent, expecting no material rewards or elevation of rank. He states that his wish is to effect “the happiness of the people” and to be “their benefactor” (*SL* 376). However, such an influx of money into the Hungarian market which is made possible by his magical power proves ineffectual against the increasing appetites of the population and lack of provisions (*SL* 378, 379). As long as every thing goes on prosperously, the Hungarian people are grateful for his deed, but the sudden reverse of the situation prompts them to regard St. Leon with “detestation and abhorrence” (*SL* 380). He is literally “hunted” and “pursued” by these people and Gabor is making a point that St. Leon never learns his lesson from his past misjudgments. His folly or rather simplicity in believing that the people will worship him as a God again prefigures Victor’s unrealistic vision that the creation of an immortal being will bring happiness to the world. St. Leon’s continual failure testifies to the unsoundness of Godwin’s hypothesis that advancement in age leads to maturity and consequently the perfectibility of man. The protagonist cannot dispense with his passions for “distinction” or fame, however experienced he becomes with age.

Godwin’s argument that the elimination of these passions is ultimately realisable is epitomized not by St. Leon himself, but by his son, Charles. The greatest experiment carried out, through documenting the power of money, is therefore the trial and tribulation of Charles. His language is typically that of Godwinian rationalism. He does not yield to St. Leon’s persuasive appeal and the delivery of his fatherly speech.

Charles does not accept St. Leon's insistence that he is not guilty of any crime, not because he perceives his father's delivery of the speech to be counterfeit. Charles does believe that the manner in which St. Leon asserts his innocence is that of "truth" (*SL* 195). He is clearly touched by his father's appeal, but he remains unaffected, unlike Marguerite, adhering to his decision which derived from his logical thinking. His statement echoes Godwin's sentiments:

How am I to be convinced that what you [St. Leon] say at this moment is not dictated more by a regard for my tranquillity, than by the simplicity of conscious truth? If I believe you, I am afraid my credit will be the offspring rather of inclination, than of probability. (*SL* 193)

His faith in "probability" is thus displayed by the fact that he is suspicious even of his own father's innocence. This strongly reflects Reid's rationalist idea that the self is capable of fathoming probable effects from a certain cause regardless of one's own feelings.

However, when we compare Marguerite's penetration of truth through her acute sensibility with Charles's failure to discern his father's true paternal affection, we cannot but see the tension between these two modes of truth. He tells his father that he is "compelled to disclaim all affinity with" and be cut off from him (*SL* 192), and this presents an unnatural picture of a feeling being who has been strongly bound with St. Leon by filial affection. We could say that Charles is a paragon of rationalist thought, because he can "separate" himself from his own emotion. This sharply contrasts with Marguerite, who claims that her husband's life is "never to be separated" (*SL* 43) from her. Charles's independent spirit is expressed in the following passage.

Standing as I do a candidate for honourable fame, I must henceforth stand by

myself, as if a man could be author of his own existence, and must expect no aid, no favour, no prepossession, from any earthly consideration, save what I am, and what I shall perform. (ibid.)

Charles thus argues vehemently for the precedence of merit over birth, and disdains the wealth and splendour that at first had dazzled him: “My fingers shall not be contaminated with an atom of it [money]” (*SL* 194). While Charles’s condemnation of relying on material wealth in establishing honour and fame is irreconcilable with St. Leon’s total dependence on the philosopher’s stone, Marguerite and Charles share the noble view that independence should be gained through one’s own merits and worth (*SL* 44). Yet Charles’s inclination to distrust his own feelings about St. Leon’s truthfulness makes him fail to discern what is really happening to his father not just once but twice. The second time round, St. Leon, disguised as Henry and appearing young, serves under his own son, but Charles cannot properly understand why it is that he feels “ardent partiality” towards Henry (*SL* 474). The external information about Henry prompts him to equate his young cadet with the infamous alchemist. This clouds Charles’s judgment about Henry who is in fact his own father.

How can I tell that the fraternal resemblance borne by your features to my own, and the sudden and ardent partiality that rose in my breast when first I saw you, have not been produced by the most detested arts? Magic dissolves the whole principle and arrangement of human action, subverts all generous enthusiasm and dignity, and renders life itself loathsome and intolerable. (*SL* 474)

This statement splits Godwin’s claim about the nature of truth into two. First, it reveals the unreliability of rational judgment which is predicated on the “objective” information coming from outside, hence avowing the validity of truth attained by feelings. Second,

it demonstrates that a person, even if the person is endowed with power to improve the condition of society, is stripped of his or her credibility altogether, if his or her power appears “supernatural” or “magical” in the eyes of the general public, or is incomprehensible to them. Consequently the person is denounced as a criminal and turns into a victim of persecution. The only way out for a persecuted subject like St. Leon is to live in alienation or to resort to bribery, but it only works on those “whose very soul melted at a bribe” (*SL* 237).

In *Frankenstein*, which I will discuss in the later chapters, we find textual echoes of characters and ideas from *St. Leon*, particularly in relation to the destructive passions of the protagonist. In *Political Justice*, voluntary will precedes “mechanical” actions or habits, and Godwin hopes for a future where the rational principle is able to rise above vicious “habits” and “custom.” However the major thematic structure of *St. Leon* is clearly “the perturbation and alloy of human passions.” As we have seen in this chapter, the alchemical powers are effectively used as a metaphor for an excessive ardour for masculine pursuits away from the domestic arena. Godwin wants to show how problematic it is to “change” the habits driven by such passions because they are deep-rooted at the level of bodily fibres. This problem mirrors the impossibility of “purifying” gold out of the alloy of ordinary metals. In this sense, Godwin fails to adhere to his own rationalist argument. Far from it, by using this alchemical motif, he demonstrates the hopelessness of excavating “fortitude” from the mechanical body. A fundamental question remains. Why did not Godwin assign the heroic role of Charles to the protagonist? Unlike Charles, St. Leon represents the incurably diseased body, and lacks the will that has commanding power over it. Perhaps the rationalist Charles should

have become the narrator-protagonist. Yet such speculation seems off the mark, for Godwin does seem to have us sympathize more with St. Leon than his son. St. Leon is a feeling being who is “inseparable” from or, more pertinently, yearning after human sympathy. Without resorting to didacticism, Godwin is more effectively able to illustrate the moral consequences of having a “weak mind” in this novel. The reader is invited to observe the psyche of the protagonist and sympathise with him. St. Leon says that he made “a sufficient experiment of the philosopher’s stone,” but all his experiments “miscarried” (*SL* 434). He uses money ultimately to achieve his goal, that is, to become the benefactor of nations, but his failure teaches him to disdain human arrogance to be like a God: “I was like a God, who dispenses his bounties profusely through twenty climates, but who at the same time sits, separate, elevated, and alone, in the highest heaven.” As he says, he “could find no equal” (*SL* 377). When St. Leon turns into a persecuted monster, we can all the more empathise with him, as he summons us to do so: “They who have never been placed in a situation like mine, will never be able to do justice to my grievance. They will perhaps say, that the calamity I now endured was a trifling one, and that a weak mind only can be elevated by the acclamations and huzzas of the multitude, or depressed by their hisses and scorn” (*SL* 282). Godwin’s philosophical purpose in writing *St. Leon* is obscured by the failure of the protagonist to form a “strong” mind. However, as in the case of *Caleb Williams*, the sentimental narrative again has illustrated Godwin’s philosophical oscillation between reason and sensibility.

4

**'Interwoven' Sensibility and Self-Government
in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Mary*
and Other writings**

As we have discussed in the previous chapter, the idea the weakness of the human mind susceptible to strong emotions is the keys to understanding Godwin's literary works. Although his theoretical position is to denounce sensibility as that which inhibits the formation of a virtuous character, his literary works such as *Caleb Williams* and *St. Leon* do not entirely coincide with that position. St. Leon was portrayed as a "nervous" person with incurable habits that crave wealth and consequently he neglects his paternal duty, but these mechanical habits are constantly in conflict with his own paternal affections that inspire care for his family and for his imaginative nation (Hungary). There is a thread of hope in the presentation of sensibility that passes between St. Leon and Marguerite, who are bound with mutual feelings. It is deeply meaningful that Marguerite represents Godwin's own wife, Mary Wollstonecraft. According to Godwin, Wollstonecraft "obstinately cling[s] to an ill-starred unhappy passion . . . because it is of the very essence of affection, to seek to perpetuate itself" (*Memoirs* 245). This seems like a strange depiction of his wife, for she was renowned for being a rigorous rationalist.¹⁵⁵ She generally derides those women who are swept away by their own passion. Was she in a double-bind situation where she could not decide whether to

¹⁵⁵ This is mainly true of *Vindications* and a period when she was writing these works.

propound rationalism or endorse sensibility? If so, what was the major contextual explanation? In the next three chapters, I would like to analyse closely Wollstonecraft's works in order to assess her views on sensibility.

In the novel, *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), Wollstonecraft takes an active engagement in developing a female character different from those generally portrayed. She argues that women were kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence, for men expected women to possess virtues incompatible with any vigorous exertion of intellect. Contrary to society's expectation that women are generally weak, Wollstonecraft aims to endow her fictional character with an ability to "think," and the strength of mind to pacify passions. She calls such a character a "genius." In the "Advertisement" to the novel *Mary*, she announces her aim to describe this female genius in a fiction where things that are not allowed to happen in reality could believably occur.

In an artless tale, . . . the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers is displayed. The female organs have been thought too weak for this arduous employment; and experience seems to justify the assertion. Without arguing physically about possibilities—in a fiction, such a being may be allowed to exist; whose grandeur is derived from the operations of its own faculties, not subjugated to opinion; but drawn by the individual from the original source.¹⁵⁶

In *Mary*, Wollstonecraft aims to portray an extraordinary heroine commanding her appetites and passions. This is not to deny the possibility that a woman who achieves self-control has less passion. Far from it, a character with such strength suggests the

¹⁵⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary, A Fiction* in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* vol.1 eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989), p.5. Hereafter cited as *Mary* in parentheses with page numbers.

power struggle between the body (or heart) and the mind within, and is consonant with the philosophical discourse on sexual passion. As Mary Poovey has argued, moralists' warnings on appetites for gambling, overeating, or public admiration presuppose that "once indulged, any appetite would become voracious and lead eventually to the most dangerous desire of all."¹⁵⁷ The same logic applies to the question of feminine self-effacement. Feminine modesty, chastity and self-denial are strongly commended, not because women have proclivity for them, but because there is an implicit cultural agreement that women are more in danger of indulging themselves in sexual appetites. As Poovey has argued, therefore, the feminine conduct advised by contemporary moralists can be considered in a deeply ambivalent light, for women's allegedly emotional responsiveness and acute sensibility were from this angle considered as something immoral that might lead to frivolity, luxuriousness, or excessive sexual desire.

Various sensibilities of the body, namely pain and pleasure, are described as the source of desires and appetites by eighteenth-century philosophers. The point of most contention in the eighteenth century was the moral judgment on these "desires." Both Francis Hutcheson and his pupil Adam Smith reject Mandeville's system that "represent[s] every passion as wholly vicious, which is so in any degree and in any direction." Wollstonecraft's argument in *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) is reminiscent of Smith's point that public good is not necessarily brought about by self-love.

Yes, sir, the regard I have for honest fame, and the friendship of the virtuous, falls far short of the respect which I have for myself. And this enlightened

¹⁵⁷ Mary Poovey, (1984), p.20.

self-love, if an epithet the meaning of which has been grossly perverted will convey my idea, forces me to see; and if I may venture to borrow a prostituted term, to *feel*, that happiness is reflected, and that, in communicating good, my soul receives its noble aliment. (*VRM* 34)

Moreover, she acknowledges a distinction between purely physical impulse and what she calls “feelings of humanity.”

We ought to beware of confounding mechanical instinctive sensations with emotions that reason deepens, and justly terms feelings of *humanity*. This word discriminates the active exertions of virtue from the vague declamation of sensibility.” (*VRM* 53)

Wollstonecraft’s notion of “instinctive sensations” corresponds with Hutcheson’s definition of “appetites” which are “preceded naturally by a sense of pain, previously to any opinion of good to be found in the object; which is desired chiefly in order to remove the pain.”¹⁵⁸ Interestingly this corresponds with Hume’s distinction between “direct passions” that arise from a natural impulse and “calm passions” that have a moral basis as I have discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. What the benevolent school scholars critiqued was Mandeville’s elimination of such a distinction. As Smith assiduously insists, the common names for the love of pleasure and for the love of sex for Mandeville denote vicious and offensive features of human nature, because his tenet famously admits of no genuine human virtue. In his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith refutes Mandeville’s claim that human virtue “falls short of that complete self-denial which it pretends to, and instead of a conquest, is commonly no more than a

¹⁵⁸ Francis Hutcheson, *Observations on ‘The Fable of the Bees’ in Six Letters* (1758) (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1989), p.60. Hereafter cited as *OFB* with page numbers in parentheses.

concealed indulgence of our passions.”¹⁵⁹ Smith’s statement implies that self-command *is* possible. Amongst the qualities he upholds, self-command is said to enable us “to abstain from present pleasure or to endure present pain, in order to obtain a greater pleasure or to avoid a greater pain in some future time” (*MS* 189). Wollstonecraft follows Smith’s moral teaching that self-denial is the key to developing human virtue, even if it signifies endurance of pain.

However Smith feels that this is inhibited by strong (physical) sensibility, while Wollstonecraft saw self-denial as a sufficient deterrent against such desire. The sensibility, he states, can be “so strong as to render all self-command impossible.”

No sense of honour can control the fears of the man who is weak enough to faint, or to fall into convulsions upon the approach of danger. Whether such weakness of nerves, as it has been called may not, by gradual exercise and proper discipline, admit of some cure, may, perhaps, be doubtful. (*MS* 156)

The weakness of nerves vitiates the power to act in accordance with one’s will, and Wollstonecraft laments that women glory in such weakness rather than being ashamed of it. They both agree that the soft, the amiable, and the gentle feminine virtues seem to “have been often regarded as mere weakness” (*MS* 306). Wollstonecraft’s notion of female weakness against voracious appetite is articulated through a philosophical observation on the appetite for “praise” made by none other than Adam Smith himself. The rich and the great, he argues, “desire to be praised for what they themselves do not think praise-worthy” (*MS* 64). The leading comparison in *The Rights of Woman* is between the rich and women. She cites Smith’s passage which talks of “the gracefulness

¹⁵⁹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* eds. D.D.Raphael and A.L.Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), p.312. Hereafter cited as *MS* with page numbers in parentheses.

of his [Lewis XIV] shape, and the majestic beauty of his features” which Adam Smith calls “a very superfluous attention.” The rich who pride themselves on “frivolous accomplishments,” she argues, can be compared to women who seek to be observed, to be attended to (*VRW* 127-129).

In the mid eighteenth century, the novel, a newly developing genre, was becoming increasingly criticised for inflating women’s imagination or stimulating passion for romantic love. Samuel Richardson, for instance, has Colonel Morden say to Lovelace in *Clarissa* (1747-8) that “men had generally too many advantages from the weakness, credulity, and inexperience of the fair sex: who were apt to be hurried into acts of precipitation by their reading inflaming novels and idle romances.”¹⁶⁰ Emily Atkins in Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771), a woman who is seduced and abandoned to become a prostitute, is an exemplary character whose weakness succumbs to her admirer’s sexual appeal. She falls a prey to Winbrooke’s false sincerity which hinted that marriage is a subjection “to which genuine love should scorn to be confined.” Emily does not realise until it is too late that “[i]f it is dangerous to be convinced, it is dangerous to listen; for our reason is so much of a machine, that it will not always be able to resist, when the ear is perpetually assailed.”¹⁶¹ There is a corresponding image in the portraiture of Eliza, the mother of the heroine in *Mary*, for she is likened to a “mere machine” (*Mary* 7). As we discussed in Chapter 1, the use of the word “machine” became common among philosophers such as Rousseau and La

¹⁶⁰ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa or, The History of a young Lady: comprehending the most important concerns of private life and particularly showing the distresses that may attend the misconduct both of parents and children in relation to marriage* ed. Angus Ross (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), pp.1279-80.

¹⁶¹ Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling* (New York and London: W.W.Norton & Company, 1958), p.40.

Mettrie who saw the human body as having a self-sustaining system.¹⁶² This is what Wollstonecraft called “mechanical instinctive sensations” which are fundamentally different from “feelings of humanity.”

Wollstonecraft’s contemporary women novelists explored the problematic nature of the female body and its adverse effects on women’s sexual reputation. Women’s concern with their exterior beauty had a deleterious effect on their physical strength. What Tom Furniss refers to as “the systematic enervation of women”¹⁶³ is at play when women labour “to be pretty, by counterfeiting weakness,” consequently beautiful weakness becomes “interwoven in a woman’s frame” (*VRM* 45, 46). Wollstonecraft’s notion of human virtue does not rest on women’s “mean arts to please” men, but on securing “her husband’s respect.”

Let fancy now present a woman with a tolerable understanding, for I do not wish to leave the line of mediocrity, whose constitution, strengthened by exercise, has allowed her body to acquire its full vigour; her mind, at the same time, gradually expanding itself to comprehend the moral duties of life, and in what human virtue and dignity consist. (*VRW* 119)

The love arising from feeding a “dying flame” by merely presenting beauty will not last forever, for “nature doomed [it] to expire when the object became familiar” (*ibid.*). That a desire to be admired or “to be loved” is grounded in man’s natural instinct was dramatised in many novels (*MS* 113). With strong self-command, women struggle to overcome the appetite for notice. It is my chief aim to draw attention to Wollstonecraft’s

¹⁶² Wollstonecraft’s theory and La Mettrie’s physiological system are compared in the next chapter in more depth.

¹⁶³ Tom Furniss, “Gender in revolution: Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft” in *Revolution in Writing: British Literary Responses to the French Revolution* ed. Kelvin Everest (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1991), p.91.

reprimand of the frivolous nature of this feminine desire, particularly that for inciting public admiration, by observing her representation of a female “genius.” The sensibility of women has been treated in many ways, but it could be reduced to three major representations which are more often than not contradictory: frivolity, delicacy and potent force. With the potential good that feminine sensibility has, many novelists, Wollstonecraft in particular, attempted to salvage the benevolent feeling that both Hutcheson and Adam Smith praised as a valuable human virtue.

1. Contemporary Novelists

Before I examine *Mary*, I would like to set the scene for Wollstonecraft’s creation of a female genius in the novel by looking at some important facets of female desire in four novels which were published about the same time as *Mary* (1788); *A Simple Story* (1791), *Julia* (1790), *Desmond* (1792), and *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796). I do not intend to prove the influence of *Mary* on these four fictional works, but merely wish to observe the effort of these authors to salvage some aspects of sensibility while censuring its destructive nature. I will later discuss the significance of Wollstonecraft’s notion of a female genius in this context.

In her *A Simple Story*, Elizabeth Inchbald demonstrates the moral failure of the heroine caused by the serious deficiencies of her education.¹⁶⁴ She depicts Miss Milner as a feeling woman whose energies such as “sprightly vivacity,” “haughty display of charms” or “pensive demeanour” dominate her conduct. Though Inchbald censures the heroine’s defects, her inability to control her passions is favourably compared with

¹⁶⁴ Elizabeth Inchbald, *A Simple Story* ed. J.M.S.Tompkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Hereafter cited as *Simple Story* in parentheses with page numbers.

Miss Fenton, who was initially thought to be “a proper match” for Lord Elmwood. Perceiving that Lord Elmwood’s choice of Miss Fenton was the result of duty and not of love, Miss Milner boldly suggests the possibility that she could “inspire her [Miss Fenton’s] destined husband with a passion which she may not have inspired” (*Simple Story* 115). When Miss Woodley approves of the match between Lord Elmwood and Miss Fenton in terms of their dispositions, their pursuits, and their inclinations, depicting their passions as “pure—white as snow,” Miss Milner cannot but condemn their passions as “not warmer” (*Simple Story* 124). The narrator describes Miss Milner’s jealousy as “the real passion of jealousy” which one can only feel from “the real passion of love.” This passion seems to be extolled despite its bodily enervation: “[it] not only affects the mind, but every fibre of the frame is a victim to it and Miss Milner’s every limb ached, with agonizing torment, while Miss Fenton, courted and beloved by Lord Elmwood, was present to her imagination” (*Simple Story* 119). Inchbald’s sentimental heroine embodies the weakness of mind which is interwoven in her physical body.

As to her passions for public admiration, Miss Milner’s lack of education leaves her a prey to vanity which triggers two tragic consequences in the novel. First is her choice of her dress in attending a masquerade. She dresses like a nun, and therefore appears as “the representative for the goddess of Chastity,” but is in fact sexually provocative for “the petticoat [is] made to festoon far above the ankle” showing “the appearance of a female much less virtuous.” (*Simple Story* 155). This provokes Lord Elmwood’s fury which almost disrupts their trusting relationship. Second is when her tumultuous passions result in “mixing in the gayest circles of London” after Lord Elmwood, then her husband, is away from England. This consequently leads to Miss Milner’s fate, that she is never to enjoy Lord Elmwood’s company.

The destructive effect of her passions is therefore ambivalently portrayed in the novel. Although, like Dr Gregory's "woman of delicacy," Miss Milner's effort to conceal her passion for Lord Elmwood is repeatedly shown at the beginning of the novel, she eventually gives vent to her emotions and the reader is shown the intimate link between desire and restraint. What Inchbald's novel offers, as Caroline Gonda argues, is the tension of self-restraint, redefining enjoyment as forbearance, delicately balancing "a pleasure too exquisite" and "the sensation of exquisite pain,"¹⁶⁵ for Miss Milner's love is called "real, delicate, and restrained love" (*Simple Story* 81).

Helen Maria Williams's construction of a virtuous character, Julia Clifford, in *Julia* rests on her ability to regulate unruly passions. The novel's heightened closure is marked by the death of Frederick Seymour, caused by his sickly passion for Julia which was never consummated in marriage. This death is prefigured in their discussion on Werter's suicide. While Julia disapproves of its moral principle, Frederick defends the erotic power of the irrepressible passions by saying "People talk of the bad tendency of this book [*Werter*], and blame the author for blending virtue and vice in the same character, because the example is dangerous. Does any person, when pleased with a book immediately determine to imitate the hero of it in every particular?"¹⁶⁶ Wollstonecraft, who later reviewed *Julia* in *The Analytical Review*, does not consider this aspect of Williams's narrative as dangerous, for she warmly recommends the book to her young female readers. The novel, Wollstonecraft argues, gives "the author an opportunity to display the most exemplary degree of rectitude in the conduct of her

¹⁶⁵ Caroline Gonda, *Reading Daughters' Fictions 1709-1834: Novels and Society from Manley to Edgeworth* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), p.185.

¹⁶⁶ Helen Maria Williams, *Julia: A Novel: interspersed with some poetical pieces*, vol.1 of 2 vols. (London: T. Cadell, 1790), pp.202, 203. Hereafter cited as *Julia* in parentheses with pages numbers.

heroine.” She quotes from the “Advertisement” to the novel which is in a sense Williams’s response to the contemporary debate on sensibility:

The purpose of these pages is to trace the danger arising from the uncontrolled indulgence of strong affections not in those instances where they lead to the guilty excesses of passion in a corrupted mind—but, when disapproved by reason, and uncircumscribed by prudence, they involve even the virtuous in calamity; since under the dominion of passion, if the horror of remorse may be avoided, misery at least is inevitable; and though we do not become the slaves of vice, we must yield ourselves the victims of sorrow. (*Julia* iii)

Wollstonecraft simply confirms Williams’s original design that “without a very great alloy of romantic notions,” the author has had Julia’s principles “so fixed that nothing can tempt her to act wrong; and as she appears like a rock, against which the waves vainly beat, no anxiety will be felt for her safety.”¹⁶⁷

It is true, drawing on a recognisable story of sentimental novels such as *La Nouvelle Héloïse*,¹⁶⁸ Williams delineates the heroine’s adamant virtue which does not permit her to profess love for Fredrick, who is already the fiancé of her beloved cousin, Charlotte Clifford (though Julia does so before he dies). As Markman Ellis notes, the novel portrays “a young woman’s struggle to contain her feelings, weighing her potentially erotic passion against her positively constructed moral probity.”¹⁶⁹ The adulterous passion of Julia and Fredrick culminates in their hyperbolic romantic

¹⁶⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Analytical Review* (1788-1797) in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* vol.7 eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989), p.252.

¹⁶⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse: Julie, or the New Eloise* trans. Judith H. McDowell (London: Pennsylvania State UP, 1968). Hereafter cited as *Héloïse* with page numbers in parentheses.

¹⁶⁹ Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the*

suffering. While endorsing the fortitude with which Julia withstands the temptation and demonstrates the importance of being “like a rock,” Williams negatively portrays Charles Seymour’s cool principles of calculation as “mechanical as those of a watch” (*Julia* 111). The narrator explains that he is “one of those prudent young men” who chose his partners at a dance by the “solid recommendation of fortune” (*Julia* 48). Ironically, feminine modesty or modest demeanor not only served “to assure the world that a woman’s appetites were under control; it also indicated that female sexuality was still assertive enough to require control.”¹⁷⁰ Although the strengthened body is a precondition for women’s liberation, the female body itself has profound social and cultural ramifications, which have to be treated with care. Julia flatly shuts out “the regions of romance” which are incessantly displayed to her by Frederick, but her glowing body after such seduction makes her feelings visible: “Julia’s complexion was a little flushed by the agitation she had suffered, which served to heighten her beauty” (*Julia* 145). Her desire is so tightly pressed down that it surfaces on the body. Julia’s excessively modest gesture does not result in self-destruction, but her giving up the fulfillment of her desire is a manifestation of feminine self-effacement.

In *Desmond* Charlotte Smith depicts the perfect model of a virtuous woman who is the idol of the male protagonist. Geraldine Verney is praised for “the purity of her heart, the excellence of her understanding, and her excessive tenderness for her children.”¹⁷¹ The plot is reminiscent of that of *Julia*, but the obstacle for Geraldine to form an intimate relationship with Desmond is her married status. Desmond reminds

Sentimental Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), p.216.

¹⁷⁰ Mary Poovey, (1984), pp.18-21.

¹⁷¹ Charlotte Smith, *Desmond, A Novel* eds. Antje Blank and Janet Todd (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2001), p.228. Hereafter cited as *Desmond* in parentheses with page numbers.

himself that she is “a married woman, and her beauty was not, therefore, to be considered by a man, looking out, as I was, for a wife, and who never harboured an idea of seducing the wife of another” (*Desmond* 295). Unlike Miss Milner, Geraldine complies with the moralist’s ideal of a dutiful wife, and willingly confines herself within the domestic circle in the retreat: “I find the perfect seclusion, the uninterrupted tranquillity I enjoy now, soothing to my spirits, and of course beneficial to my health” (*Desmond* 192). She is indifferent to all the seductive approaches of admirers who intrude upon her domestic tranquility. Yet she laments her feminine delicacy which makes her susceptible to much wretchedness caused by her husband’s dissipation.

Is it that I set out in life with too great a share of sensibility? Or is it my lot to be particularly wretched?—Every means I take to save myself from pain—to save those I love—on whom, indeed, my Happiness depends, serves only to render me more miserable. (*Desmond* 159)

Although she is depicted as a typically feminine character with acute sensibility, she shares Wollstonecraft’s liberal views and expresses them with passion.

I had rather meet death than be in his [Mr Verney’s] power . . . If I get among the wildest collection of those people whose ferocity arises not from their present liberty, but their recent bondage, is it possible to suppose they will injure me, who am myself a miserable slave, returning with trembling and reluctant steps, to put on the most dreadful of all fetters? Fetters that would even destroy the freedom of my mind. (*Desmond* 303-4)

However she is not radical enough to strip off the fetters that impinge on her freedom. Geraldine is portrayed as a martyr who puts on these fetters by herself. She says she does so because “it is my *duty*” (*Desmond* 304). Mr Bethel acts as a mouthpiece of

Smith when he poses an enigmatic question, “why is it that the strongest minds . . . shall yet sink under the influence of images impressed on the brain by a disturbed digestion, or a quickened circulation?” and observes that there “appears to be a strange propensity in human nature to torment itself” (*Desmond* 177). The answer is implied. Because the strongest mind does not give way to bodily desire, it consequently “torments” itself by restraining various feelings which the body generates.

Emma Courtney, depicted as a liberal, romantic and passionate woman by Mary Hays, is also conscious that her affections are “interwoven” with her body. Emma’s description of the attachment she developed towards Mr Harley has strong sexual implications: “I drank in large and intoxicating drougts of a delicious poison.”¹⁷² Although it was not customary for a woman to propose to a man, Emma ventures to confide her sentiments to Mr Harley through a letter.

It is certain, however singular it may appear, that many months before we became personally acquainted, the report of your worth and high qualities had generated in my mind, an esteem and reverence, which has gradually ripened into a tenderness, that has, at length, mixed itself with all my associations, and is become interwoven with every fibre of my heart. (*Emma* 80)

Amongst the four female novelists Hays is most markedly aware of the physical body as that which is closely entwined with the mind.¹⁷³ When her love is not returned by Mr Harley, Emma suffers from an “internal malady” (*Emma* 151) which is described as a

¹⁷² Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* Ed. Eleanor Ty (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.72. Hereafter cited as *Emma* in parentheses with page numbers.

¹⁷³ Mary Hays was immensely influenced by the French philosopher Claude Adrien Helvetius (1751-71) who argues that “strong passions” are the “germ productive of genius, and the powerful spring that carries men to great actions.” See *De L’esprit-or, Essays on the Mind, and its Several Faculties* (London, 1759), p.150.

condition where “the faculties both of mind and body seemed almost suspended,” and this was gradually succeeded by the “disease of body” which “brought on a slow, remitting, fever” (*Emma* 149). Moreover Emma justifies her passions by questioning, “Are we, or are we not... the creatures of sensation and circumstance?” and by further asking herself, “[i]s it possible that you can be insensible of all the mighty mischiefs which have been caused by this passion...?” (*Emma* 142, 143), as if to say that one’s character is destined to be formed by the result of unavoidable impressions, which makes self-command unthinkable. Like Miss Milner, Emma celebrates such passions, citing Rousseau: “Common men know nothing of violent sorrows, nor do great passions ever break out in weak minds” (*Emma* 156). Claiming that “passions and powers are synonymous,” she says the capacity to be “impressed” is *and* generates the power (*Emma* 147, italics added). This definition of bodily sensibility therefore is in direct opposition to the general conception that yielding to passions is a human flaw or a sign of weakness.

All the heroines of these novels possessed sensibility to a varying degree, and struggle either to restrain or justify it. Except in *A Simple Story* they receive sufficient education which cultivates their understanding. Contrary to Wollstonecraft’s educationalist position, however, education (both formal and self-taught) which gives them opportunity to expand their mind into political or philosophical inquiry, forming their virtuous characters, does not necessarily quell their passions. At best the stimulation of the mind “diverted” or “abated” the force of passions (*Emma* 148). The treatment of female passions is indeed a problematic issue for women writers, for the word has sexual connotations, but passion is also thought to be a productive energy that gives a certain force to the mind.

2. Female Genius in *Mary*

A female genius is hypothetically conceived and dramatised in the novel *Mary*. The chief characteristic of a female genius may be that such a character makes moral teachings on frivolity and delicacy completely redundant, for she is naturally strong and prefers solitude to social gaiety. By creating a narrative about such a character in "A Fiction," Wollstonecraft attempted to reconcile the discrepancy between the ideal and actual strength in women.

The educational background of Mary differs from Julia or Emma whose fathers took the entire responsibility for their education, since Mary's parents were indifferent to their daughter's intellectual development. However much she was neglected, she had the power to develop her own thinking faculties: "Neglected in every respect, and left to the operations of her own mind, she considered every thing that came under her inspection, and learned to think" (*Mary* 10). Although like Geraldine the heroine of *Mary* repeats the marriage vows without thinking, it being the wish of her parents, she soon realises that the marriage was a mistake. Neither does she consider living with her husband, Charles, absolutely necessary at the beginning. While Charles goes to finish his education, she sets off to Lisbon with her dying friend, Ann. When she meets the hero, a literary "genius," Henry, she is instantly attracted to him, but their relationship remains strictly Platonic. Henry eventually dies, and the novel ends with Mary hoping for death and a world where "there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage" (*Mary* 73).

While Mary's intellect develops in spite of the fact that her education was totally neglected, the indolent and delicate body of Mary's mother, Eliza, is portrayed as a natural consequence of the wrong kind of education, which is reminiscent of Emily

Atkins's background. Reading too many fictional works resulted in Eliza's sickly and die-away languor. Like Emily, Eliza indulges in reading novels: "she ran over those most delightful substitutes for bodily dissipation, novels." As a result her imagination and passions are stimulated, as the narrator remarks, "Nothing could be more natural than the development of the passions" (*Mary* 8). Her desire to read novels is described as emanating from the "bodily or the animal soul" and all the other pleasures such as "the glare of lights, the studied inelegancies of dress, and the compliments offered up at the shrine of false beauty" are all addressed to the "senses" (*ibid.*).

One would expect the portraiture of Mary to be the direct opposite of Eliza, and to reflect Wollstonecraft's faith in reason based on physical and mental strength, and its ability to develop both morally and intellectually. Interestingly, however, Mary's feelings seem to outweigh her reason and understanding: "Her understanding was strong and clear, when not clouded by her feelings; but she was too much the creature of impulse, and the slave of compassion" (*Mary* 12). This seems like the faithful depiction of what Adam Smith has called "the warfare within the breast" which "may be too violent to be at all consistent with internal tranquillity and happiness" (*MS* 245). It is also worth noting that Wollstonecraft categorises those susceptible to the "senses" into two morally distinct types. While she despises the "captive of sense" or "depraved sensualist, who is only moved by what strikes his gross senses" (*Mary* 59, 60), she celebrates sensibility which is "the most exquisite feeling of which the human soul is susceptible" (*ibid.*).

On the one hand Wollstonecraft endorses reason in women, and, on the other, praises sensibility. This ambivalence must result in the "fate" of genius, as she would have said. She begins by writing "Rousseau's fate is the fate of genius" in her review of

Rousseau's *The Confessions*, and she gives sympathetic comments on his character:

. . . the excess of his affection for his fellow-creatures, his exquisite sensibility, and that panting after distinction, so characteristic of genius, all contributed to render his conduct strange and inexplicable to little minds; for experience seems to prove, that a man of genius is seldom respected by his inferiors, if they live within his vortex, nor are his moral virtues allowed to be pure, because he is a rule to himself.¹⁷⁴

Mary's genius is also drawn from her exquisite sensibility, which enables her to appreciate nature and to feel "ecstasies" (*Mary* 16). She resembles Rousseau in that she also sheds tears not only from sympathy but from "the affections which bound her to her fellow creatures" (*Mary* 59). Mary's sensibility "prompted her to search for an object to love" rather than to be loved like Miss Milner (Lady Elmwood) who could not endure the solitary life where there is nobody to love or admire her. What is extraordinary about Mary is that she is quite indifferent to being loved, for, as Adam Smith has said, "[m]an naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely" (*MS* 113). While the portraiture of Mary's mother was concentrated on her sensual aspects, Mary's sensibility is disconnected from sensuality altogether. Her pure affection towards Ann which "work[s] up her mind to such a degree of anxiety" is markedly compared with "some common-place comfort" administered by the ladies surrounding them (*Mary* 31, 32). This kind of genius would require little social interaction, disregarding the external factors such as the role of a mentor or an instructor.

Like Geraldine, Mary is portrayed as a woman of strong sensibility with liberal

¹⁷⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Analytical Review Vol.6* (1790) in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* vol.7 eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: Pickering, 1989), pp.231, 232.

ideas, but is carefully depicted with some positive feminine traits. She has “tenderness” and she “exercised her compassion so continually, that it became more than a match for self-love” (*Mary* 11). This statement appears to reiterate Smith’s argument against Mandeville, that sympathy “cannot, in any sense, be regarded as a selfish principle” (*MS* 317). At the same time Wollstonecraft does not fail to explicate the dangerous nature of sensibility. She depicts Mary as “violent in her temper,” though only as a detestable inheritance from her “passionate” father (*Mary* 10). How then can Wollstonecraft salvage passion from a self-sustaining machine which has its own system of movements? This question is raised by Henry in the novel. He repeats Humean scepticism, and advises Mary on the fluctuating nature of “our sentiments.”

Our affections as well as our sentiments are fluctuating; you will not perhaps always either think or feel as you do at present: the object you now shun may appear in a different light...In advising thee in this style, I have only thy good at heart, Mary. (*Mary* 45, 46)

However Mary believes in what Adam Smith had confidently pronounced, that one’s “affections are involuntary—yet they can only be fixed by reflection.” She further reassures Henry that, when her affections are involuntary, they “make quite a part of my soul, are interwoven in it” (*Mary* 46). While Henry views “affections” as something uncertain and impalpable, Mary sees “affections” as something that can be fixed within a self, or intertwined with the “soul.” This fixation is perhaps what Wollstonecraft admired in the characterisation of Julia, because her principles are “so fixed that nothing can tempt her to act wrong; and as she appears like a rock.” Even though the body is associated with a “machine” that has its own logic, by believing that it can be properly fixed with continual effort, Wollstonecraft was able to defend not only the “affections”

but also the “body” with which these affections are “intertwined.” She could believe in Hutchesonian benevolence as immovable human nature.

Mary’s benevolence “knew no bounds,” and what makes her an “interested observer,” the narrator says, is the “warmth of her compassion” (*Mary* 16). Passion and compassion are often accompanied by an adjective “warm” and this functions as an important cultural category which signifies humane and moral qualities. When Miss Milner scorns Miss Fenton’s passion for not being warmer, she hints at her own “warm” passion. Mary’s affections are coloured by religious feelings and with almost Cowperian enthusiasm, and they are roused by the “display of divine mercy” (*Mary* 17). Her desire or passion seems to be directed towards what Hutcheson calls “the most constant, and lively pleasure” in “kind affections to our fellow-creatures.” He explains that

[this pleasure is] so great and durable, and so much strengthened by the probable hope of every other valuable pleasure of life, especially the esteem and love of our fellows, or at least of the better part of them, that other pleasures seem almost to vanish when separated from them; and ever the greatest pains seem supportable if they do not exclude them. (*OFB* 64).

The kind of affections which Wollstonecraft presents are more corporeal and are compared to muscles or physical features, for “those affections that have once been called forth and *strengthened by exercise*, are only smothered, not killed, by disappointment” (*Mary* 35, italics added). This metaphor is perhaps unique amongst other women writers who used such an expression as “affectionate heart” metaphysically to signify moral goodness. It is evident that the novel is shot through with the language of Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, for it was he who allegorised “exercise” to mean moral discipline.

The wise man whom Nature has endowed with this too exquisite sensibility, and whose too lively feelings have not been sufficiently blunted and hardened by early education and proper exercise, will avoid, as much as duty and propriety will permit, the situations for which he is not perfectly fitted. (*MS* 245)

Wollstonecraft's conviction that "exertion" whether it be mental, bodily or even emotional will have a lasting effect on the tangible part of the self echoes Smith's belief in "proper exercise," which makes the notion of "fortitude" appropriate in moral contexts.

Mary's strength stands out amongst many other "weak" characters in the novel including Ann and Henry, whose constitutions are naturally weak (*Mary* 40). There is, for instance, a sharp contrast between the strength of Mary's body and the failing of Ann's health. Mary has so fit a body that she can forget to take nourishment when she is absorbed in study (*Mary* 17), whereas Ann can hardly support "the animal function" when she does the same.

Ann has not fortitude enough to brave such accumulated misery; and besides, the canker-worm is lodged in her heart, and preys on her health. She denies herself every little comfort; things that would be no sacrifice when a person is well, are absolutely necessary to alleviate bodily pain, and support the animal functions. (*Mary* 18) Thus Mary's physical strength enables her to be absorbed in intellectual researches or carry out charitable activities.

It is a common understanding that Wollstonecraft's critical attitude towards essentialism in *The Rights of Woman* is based on the notion that education or environment generates gender difference or promotes individual talents, but this is fundamentally opposite to the way Mary developed her virtues. Mary's genius seems to contradict Wollstonecraft's later educational theory of what modern commentators call

“environmentalism,” a theory which conceives the self as a product of environment and therefore emphasizes the importance of social interaction and education.

3. Women and Self-Government

Wollstonecraft's inclination to co-opt external influences in the process of identity creation is observed in her earlier educational writings such as *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Original Stories from Real Life; with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (1788). In *The Education of Daughters*, she believes that a child is born with instincts and passions which it is the business of education to bring under the control of reason.¹⁷⁵ *Original Stories* is particularly focused on the role of education in developing self-control in female children. The governess called Mrs Mason tries to reform two indolent children, Mary and Caroline, who have been misguided by willful parents. They are described as “shamefully ignorant”¹⁷⁶ and their idleness and gluttony are severely criticized. Their excessive appetites are represented as the ill-effect of civilization. Mrs Mason's attempts to improve the inner qualities of these children are based on Wollstonecraft's “perfectibilist” view¹⁷⁷ that anyone is capable of improvement. Improvement, for her, meant that one's mental exertion will gradually enable one to reflect on the emotive aspect of his/herself and control it. Considering that “self-control” is Wollstonecraft's primary interest in educational writings, it is quite apt

¹⁷⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* vol. 4 eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989).

¹⁷⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Original Stories from Real Life* in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* vol. 4 eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989), p.361. Hereafter cited as *Original Stories* in parentheses with page numbers.

¹⁷⁷ Harriet Devine Jump, *Mary Wollstonecraft: Writer* (New York and London:

that the novel *Mary* is about the heroine's self-control and firmness of mind. However the importance of environment is hardly exemplified by the heroine of this novel. Moreover Ann is Mary's role model but not a mentor. Mary takes the initiative to learn how to write just by imitating Ann's writing, because a genius, the narrator says, requires little instruction.

The most highlighted theme in *Original Stories* is the ever-present body or bodily desire which needs to be suppressed. Mrs Mason, for instance, teaches the importance of enduring bodily pain. Regulating "appetites and whims" she believes all contribute to forming strength of mind and a habit of controlling violent passions. Mrs Mason admonishes,

Believe me, it is the patient endurance of pain, that will [enable] you to resist your passions; after you have borne bodily pain, you will have firmness enough to sustain the still more excruciating agonies of the mind. (*Original Stories* 438)

Mary, without any great effort, the narrator says, "conquers her appetites and whims" so entirely that "when her understanding or affections had an object, she almost forgot she had a body which required nourishment" (*Mary* 17). This forgetfulness of her own body accentuates the importance of the mind and the disconnection from the body or the nerve system: "she could endure the greatest fatigue without appearing sensible of it" (*Mary* 38). While the body or its sensuality is gendered feminine by Wollstonecraft and her contemporary novelists, the disembodied part of the self, the mind or "spirits," is non-gendered. The obsession with bodily needs is condemned as indulgent and sometimes vicious. When she is with Henry sitting on the damp ground, Mary cares

about his illness, but is negligent of the “material injury” that may be caused to her own body: “she did not fear bodily pain” (ibid.). As Adam Smith has said, “a certain firmness of nerves and hardiness of constitution, whether natural or acquired, are undoubtedly the best preparatives for all the great exertions of self-command” (*MS* 245).

In terms of “appetites” and “vulgar” passions, Wollstonecraft wanted to efface the source, namely the body, and this is consistent throughout her writings, especially in *Mary* and *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*. Mary’s Platonic love relationship with Henry was possible only because of her absolute control over physical passion. By denying desire or the bodily aspects of the self, she almost reduces the self to the point where she calls it “spirit.” Many modern critics have argued that Mary’s passion for Henry strangely lacks eroticism, but I believe that this was purposefully done to show that a genius could command passions as strong as physical love.

This tendency is observed in other texts such as ‘The Cave of Fancy’ (1786)¹⁷⁸ written a year before *Mary*. The most interesting aspect of this text is that one of the main narrators is a female “spirit.” The question of why the speaker had to be a “spirit” is worth considering. The spirit has lately entered the cave where all mortals go after death. The story closely resembles that of *Mary* in that this spirit, when she was alive, was in a hopeless love relationship with a “friend”, but was confined to an unhappy arranged marriage with an older businessman. Just before this female narrator was forced to marry against her will, she was tempted to let her secret feelings escape her own lips. It was the “spirit” which watched over her impulse to give away the secret,

¹⁷⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, ‘Extract of a Cave of Fancy’ in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* vol.1 eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989). Hereafter cited as *CF* with page numbers in parentheses.

“My active spirit was painfully on the watch to repress every tender emotion” (CF 204). The “spirit” is as it were the Superego in Freudian terminology. In this narrative, the sentimentalism of the female spirit is developed to such a degree that the afterlife is again romanticized, and the theme of immortality is brought to the fore. At the same time, the spirit is represented as an ongoing entity that has an independent existence after the destruction of the body. The spirit recounts how she wished for immortal life.

[We] began to talk of the immortality of the soul; I declared that I could not live without this conviction. . . . the affection we felt was not of a perishable nature. (CF 202).

The effacing of the body or bodily presence not only suggested the morally destructive aspect of sensibility, but also indicated that Wollstonecraft believed in the existence of the immortal soul separate from the sexualized body.

Some commentators have argued that the spirit in ‘The Cave of Fancy’ is neither male nor female, and this is true to some extent, in that a soul which has lost its body is sexless. Barbara Taylor has argued that the female spirit is in fact, “a proto-feminist whose sublimity points to a moral stature rarely accorded women.”¹⁷⁹ Wollstonecraft may well have asked such a question as, “Why should imaginative grandeur be all on men’s side?” as Taylor supposes. But Wollstonecraft would have taken it further and asked, “Why should the bodily display and its sensuality be all on women’s side?”, for there would be no or little importance attached to beauty if there were no physical presence of the body.

The purity of the heroine’s passion is of course a running theme of

¹⁷⁹ Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.64.

eighteenth-century novels, in which Platonic love is idealized. Julie and St. Preux in Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse* are a case in point. But the complex representation of the body is equally important in explaining Wollstonecraft's preoccupation with the disembodiment of the self. On the one hand, Wollstonecraft considered bodily strength as the major premise of intellectual capacity, but on the other, she thought the concept of the body too problematic to handle especially in fiction, for it was charged with meanings such as sexual desire, sexual difference, or sensualism. It is possible that she wanted to dismiss it altogether. Both in *Mary* and 'The Cave of Fancy,' Wollstonecraft is much preoccupied with controlling bodily desire. The narrative spends so much time on monitoring the passions of the heroines that these female geniuses become excessively "reflective" and consequently "melancholic" or even "solipsistic." Their narratives are dominated by their excessive emotion caused by too much self-control.

4. Solitary Genius

When Wollstonecraft depicted a female genius as excessively emotional, it could be that she was falling back on a rather hackneyed idea that a Romantic genius has emotions too powerful to suppress. However hard Mary tries, she can hardly "conceal her violent emotions" (*Mary* 17). Reason and judgment are on occasion played down at the cost of praising the sensibility of a genius: "That as judgment improves, genius evaporates" (*Mary* 37). Sensibility is not repudiated as much as in *The Rights of Woman* and its excess is allowed a certain grandeur. When she has her heroine, Mary, question "why do thoughts [and rapturous emotions] so rapidly rush into my mind, and yet when they disappear leave such deep traces?" (*Mary* 57), she sets aside her tenet that instructs women to monitor and curb excessive emotion, and she almost takes pride in her

heroine's inability to control such rapturous emotions. It could be said that Wollstonecraft's attempt to portray a female genius involves a manipulation of gender representation. Mary, however, does not only possess acute sensibility but is also capable of exerting self-command which is principally a masculine trait. The effusive nature of sensibility may be denominated feminine, but the heroine is also an embodiment of the virtues of self-denial. This gender distinction may reflect a particular anthropological observation. We could observe a strong parallel between Mary's stoicism and Adam Smith's theory on the "Influence of Custom and Fashion upon Moral Sentiments."

In the section on the Influence of Custom, cultivated virtues in civilized nations are set against the virtues of self-denial in barbarous nations.

Among civilized nations, the virtues which are founded upon humanity, are more cultivated than those which are founded upon self-denial and the command of the passions. Among rude and barbarous nations, it is quite otherwise, the virtues of self-denial are more cultivated than those of humanity. The general security and happiness which prevail in ages of civility and politeness, afford little exercise to the contempt of danger, to patience in enduring labour, hunger and pain. (*MS 205*)

Once again "exercise" is the key to developing the virtues of self-denial. Smith praises the unconquerable firmness of the "savages," which does not permit them to indulge in the weakness of love. Over this passion, Smith argues, they exert absolute self-command. Whereas the weaknesses of those who are brought up to live in civilized societies are such that they "complain when they are in pain, if they grieve when they are in distress, if they allow themselves either to be overcome by love, or to be

discomposed by anger” (*MS* 207). His rhetoric is heavily reliant on Burke’s ideas of the sublime and beautiful, and is also gendered. For instance, such weakness of civilized manners is characterised as “unpardonable effeminacy” or “indecent and unmanly sensuality.”

Since our sentiments concerning beauty of every kind, are so much influenced by custom and fashion, it cannot be expected, that those, concerning the beauty of conduct, should be entirely exempted from the dominion of those principles.
(*MS* 200)

Mrs Mason’s two pupils and Mary’s mother, Eliza, reminds us of Emily Atkins and Miss Milner whose vanity or love of praise was a symptom of their weakness. They are typical feminine characters whose minds have been affected by the civilized way of life. In *Mary*, “[r]iches, and the consequent state” are said to be “the sublime of weak minds.” Their minds, the narrator says, are “shackled with a set of notions concerning propriety, the fitness of things for the world’s eye, trammels which always hamper weak people” (*Mary* 30).

Smith further depicts the style of manners in civilized society as effeminate: “the delicate sensibility required in civilized nations sometimes destroys the masculine firmness of the character” (*MS* 209). The genius in *Mary* is defined not so much as feminine “exquisite sensibility” as masculine firmness to command it. The characterisation of such a primitive genius is therefore divested of feminine delicacy or “unmanly sensuality.” As we have earlier noted, Wollstonecraft’s effort to distinguish sensibility from sensuality is reinforced by the principle of self-denial, which is strictly masculine. Mary discovers after a long journey that

Sensibility is the most exquisite feeling of which the human soul is susceptible:

when it pervades us, we feel happy and could it last unmixed, we might form some conjecture of the bliss of those paradisiacal days, when the obedient passions were under the dominion of reason, and the impulses of the heart did not need correction (*Mary* 59).

This in turn suggests that one's heart does need correction in a civilized society. That is the reason why *Original Stories* is a tribute to masculine firmness of mind as well as a rebuttal to feminine weakness. By giving Mary's genius a special status, her failure in finding happiness is attributed to society and the fault is always outside of the self, namely the society where inner virtues are not valued. Her solitary or rather solipsistic way of life is not negatively portrayed in the novel. Rather, the death wish is presented as the only way out for such an "anachronistic" woman. I use this term, anachronistic, because Wollstonecraft, consciously or not, projected her ideal woman as a primitive genius whose happiness was predicated upon living in the state of nature. Self-control is the key to the intellectual development of a genius in the age of civilization as Mrs Mason demonstrates, but too much of it will ultimately lead to the absence of the body, hence death. The fear of death is the ultimate passion which threatens humanity, and those who conquer "the king of terrors," Adam Smith wrote, are "not likely to lose his presence of mind at the approach of any other natural evil." The command of fear and anger, he adds, denominates "fortitude, manhood, and strength of mind" (*MS* 238, 239). By presenting a female genius as an almost disembodied being, Wollstonecraft was forming a contradictory view to her feminist theory which she was later to develop. For her, this balance between the body and mind was subtle; perhaps it made sense to herself, but she has often been criticized for being incoherent and muddled. This is a reasonable evaluation. Her rhetoric of a primitive genius recuperates a grandeur in a

female character to some extent, but fails to support her progressive ideas. This oscillation partly reflects the contemporary philosophical issues concerning the essential character of self, but is partly symbolic of Wollstonecraft's own ambivalent ideas that what makes self a genius has been education and exertion, but what propelled her to develop her own intellect was her extraordinary passion. After all, Wollstonecraft has given her own name, Mary, to the heroine of the novel.

5

**Imagining the Body in
Mary Wollstonecraft's
*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman***

The female body was re-presented by Wollstonecraft in her fictional character, Mary, her alter-ego, in which excessive emotion was harmonised with extraordinary physical strength. Hyper-sensibility is, however, negatively depicted, if not repudiated, in *The Rights of Woman*. In this political tract, there is a sharp awareness of bodily sensibility, expressed by the words “animal spirits,” “passions” and “sensations,” which affects the human capacity to reason. Therefore, there is a strange contest between reason and sensibility in her supposedly rationalist argument, as Miriam Brody points out. The female body and passion, which Wollstonecraft “attempted to submerge surfaced in her text in spite of herself to disrupt and qualify her argument.”¹⁸⁰ This may be partly due to the eighteenth-century literary trend of endorsing sensibility, which invoked “human nature” and “the passions” as Chris Jones has argued,¹⁸¹ but there are two other contiguous factors that can be registered to explain the prominence of the body in Wollstonecraft’s texts.

The first refers to the fact that the knowledge of bodies in the very nature of their bones, nerves, and reproductive organs, not just of men but of women, became

¹⁸⁰ See Miriam Brody, Introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992), p.69.

¹⁸¹ See Chris Jones, (1993).

more accessible in the eighteenth century.¹⁸² These “bodies,” in the corporeal and scientific sense, came to bear an enormous weight of cultural meaning in the Enlightenment era. However, what seemed to be “scientific” and “neutral” is actually embedded in cultural and moral values that are heavily gendered, especially with reference to bodily sensibility. Wollstonecraft’s enlightenment statement about reason, which has been generally treated as an exemplar of her feminist theory of gender, can only be properly understood within the cultural context in which the female body had special prominence as the metaphysical site of sensibility.¹⁸³ This body, however, proved more problematic than it seemed. The culture of sensibility represented the body no less as the source of desire and passions that are the counterforce to reason than as the organic “machine” which enables mental exertion and unfolds intellectual development. To elaborate, not only does Wollstonecraft metaphorically transpose “the body” into that which causes passions to arise and sometimes aggravates uncontrollable desire, but more importantly uses it as the basis of mental strength. The fruit of education which strengthens the mind, according to her, produces the power of “reflection.” In *The Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft uses this word as almost synonymous with “reason,” which she argues must be “the director of the whole host of passions,” for the “passions, are neither good nor evil dispositions, till they receive a direction” (*VRM* 31).¹⁸⁴ We need to inquire whether her frequent references to mental “strength”

¹⁸² See for example Thomas Laqueur, (1990).

¹⁸³ G.J.Barker-Benfield has demonstrated how profound and widespread this culture was in literature, religion (evangelicalism), and economy (consumerism). See *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1992).

¹⁸⁴ Thomas Paine also acknowledges these “two distinct classes of what are called thoughts—those that we produce in ourselves by reflection and the act of thinking, and those that bolt into the mind of their own accord.” See *The Age of Reason* (1794) (New York: Prometheus Books, 1984), p.50. Hereafter cited as *AR* with page numbers in parentheses. Wollstonecraft met Paine in the late 1780s when Johnson organised

and “exercise” are purely metaphorical. While she talks of mentality, her terminology is often profoundly physical. In *The Rights of Woman*, she maintains that

. . . the mind gains strength by the exercise, sufficient, perhaps, to comprehend the answers which, in another step of existence, it may receive to the anxious questions it asked, when the understanding with feeble wing was fluttering round the visible effects to dive into the hidden cause. The passion also, the winds of life, would be useless, if not injurious, did the *substance* which composes our thinking being, after we have thought in vain, only become the support of vegetable life, and invigorate a cabbage, or blush in a rose.” (*VRW* 178)

Wollstonecraft does not explicate what constitutes “the substance,” but this word in a physiological sense prompts one to conceive “the matter or tissue composing an animal body” or “any particular kind of corporeal matter.”¹⁸⁵ With this frame of reference, together with the fact that medical discourse had a profound influence on the notion of the body, it is possible that she could no longer clearly distinguish the realm of the body from that of the mind, despite her rigorous argument about independent human reason. It is also worth commenting on her perception of this term “substance.” She touches upon “passion” which would be useless or even injurious when the “substance” only contributes to the maintenance of organic life. The power of soul to direct and move, she suggests, does more than what is needed for material subsistence, which alerts us to see a spiritual level beyond corporeality.

weekly dinners.

¹⁸⁵ See *The Oxford English Dictionary*. “Substance” 7. & 8. According to the OED, the first use of the word in this sentence in the eighteenth century is by Richard Blackmore, in his *Treatise of Consumptions* (1724). He is also the author of *A Treatise of the Spleen and Vapours* (London 1725).

The second formidable influence comes from Rousseau who considered the state of nature to be superior to civilization. Fuseli's "faults" from which Wollstonecraft "caught the infection" of Rousseauvian idealism are elaborated in Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of The Rights of Woman* (1798). Godwin says that "Smitten with Rousseau's conception of the perfection of the savage state, the essential abortiveness of all civilization, Mr Fuseli . . . looks at all our little attempts at improvement, with a spirit that borders perhaps too much upon contempt and indifference" (*Memoirs* 234). Similarly, Wollstonecraft's language of sensibility could well have been in great part shaped by Rousseau's criticism of the artificialities and inequalities of high society. Being a sympathiser with radicalism and a visionary of egalitarian society,¹⁸⁶ like Rousseau Wollstonecraft disdains the idle and "effeminate" or weakened bodies of the aristocratic class as opposed to the robust and strong physique of primitive people.

Yet we must highlight their opposing views on the treatment of sex and gender. Wollstonecraft refutes Rousseau's claim that women are made the scapegoat for "unlimited desires."¹⁸⁷ It may be argued, quite rightly, that *The Rights of Woman*, resolutely advocating women's rationality and self-control, is the antithesis to *Emile* (1762) with its gentle and pleasing 'Sophie,' Rousseau's fictional creation of the ideal woman of sensibility fit to marry Emile. However Wollstonecraft cannot wholly deny the claim that the female body from infancy has been "made the weathercock of its own sensations" (*VRW* 136,137) and is inclined to sensual and gluttonous indulgence.

Wollstonecraft's ambivalent attitude towards "refinement," "progress" and

¹⁸⁶ See Introduction by Miriam Brody. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992), p.48.

¹⁸⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education* ed. Allan Bloom (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1991), p.359. Hereafter referred to as *Emile* with page numbers in parentheses.

“civilization” can be attributed to her confusion about “whether one’s passions multiply or diminish with the progression of civilization” and to her optimism about sensibility. She connects sensibility and passions with naturalness and the body to which she, in one form or another, pays tribute as “exquisitely polished instinct” (*VRW* 132) that “perceives” truth. Her equivocal view about materialism added further complication. On the one hand, she celebrates the increased knowledge of science and art in civilized societies, with cultivated taste and reason. On the other, she embraces Rousseau’s belief that civilization brings more evils than good, such as “indolence,” “vanity” and “passions.” These contradictory views coexist in Wollstonecraft’s writings, and convolute her argument. In essence, however, I would like to argue that her self-propelling paradox is generated by her pseudo-materialist position, namely her eagerness to prioritise the immaterial soul over bodily sensibility, while failing to extricate it from the body or the passions. Medical discourse had an immense role in the development of anthropological speculations about what puts the human soul above any other entity, including animals. It also had a profound bearing upon the notion of a cosmic spirit moving through nature,¹⁸⁸ for these issues were constantly raised by eighteenth-century physiologists. On the score of human reason against passions, they were bound together by the term “sensitive soul,” to which many writers across disciplines referred as the working of “nature.”

This chapter neither sets out to simplify the discourse on sensibility into comprehensive binaries of reason and instinct, spirit and matter, or soul and body, nor tries to foreground Wollstonecraft’s convoluted argument about reason and sensibility. It

¹⁸⁸ See Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000), p.329.

aims to clarify where the argument about the “body” or “bodies” in relation to reason led. This will be discussed with reference to medical discourse and to her educationist stance.¹⁸⁹ It seems to me that the themes in *The Rights of Woman*, like those in Godwin’s *Political Justice*, integrate an ontological attempt to excavate not only reason but moral agency.¹⁹⁰ The soul as the seat of intellectual properties, even when isolated from the gendered body, proved problematic for Wollstonecraft. Her constant references to the body with pent-up desire and sexual passion deviate from what she had set out to do, that is, to overturn Rousseau’s sensual female body and to sublimate the soul.

1. The Soul as the Power of the Mind

The Sensorium or the nerve system that could operate independently of one’s “will” or rational mind becomes a feminist issue for Wollstonecraft. One cannot enjoy or experience anything without the body or the “organs of sense,” but “to their senses, are women made slaves.”

This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others, and content with its own station; for the exercise of the understanding, as life advances, is the only method pointed out by nature to claim the passions (*VRW* 130).

Sensibility or what she also calls the movement of “subtile electric fluid” produces “habitual association” (*VRW* 186), which could become a hindrance to exercising reason. The sixth chapter of *The Rights of Woman* discusses this, arguing that “[o]ver those

¹⁸⁹ Both Rousseau and Wollstonecraft produce instructive books such as the former’s *Emile* and the latter’s *Original Stories*.

¹⁹⁰ Rousseau had also sought to locate moral agency in the body, but only in the male

instantaneous associations we have little power" (*VRW* 185). For her, through the process of "growth," ideas are associated by the workings of "animal spirits" or "the happy energy of associating thoughts," and this association has a "great effect on the moral character" (*VRW* 186). She thus ascribes moral character to associations made in the course of life. The vulnerability of the sensible mind commonly possessed by women is here set against the "strength of mind" which could "efface the superinductions of art that have smothered nature" (*ibid.*).

Yet Rousseau had considered this "sensitivity" or "delicacy" to be an admirable virtue. He believed there exist those with "sensitive souls" living apart from perverted society, in whom "nature" still reigns. For him, Julie and Saint Preux, in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, undoubtedly belong to this group. Saint Preux admires Julie for possessing the "voice of nature," which is stronger than that of her wisdom (*Héloïse* 45), and the latter acknowledges it: "While teaching us to think, you [Saint Preux] have learned from us to feel" (*Héloïse* 238). As Denise Riley states, Rousseauvian thought is the readiest example that suggests the association of "women" with the natural¹⁹¹ or the realm of feeling, and consequently left a gloomy but powerful impression upon Wollstonecraft about sexual difference.

Wollstonecraft unfolds a hypothetical argument about future women who, with their independent reason, would "guard the mind from storing up vicious associations" (*VRW* 190) which "entangled love with their motives of action" (*VRW* 189). Thus, her animadversion on women's indolence and negligence about self-improvement is partially directed towards their lack of mental strength, "reasons" and "will." Although

body.

¹⁹¹ Denise Riley, *"Am I That Name?" Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990), p.36.

she laments the state of “Half the sex, in its present infantile state,” she believes that the condition is still curable, in that women’s weakness of mind is less owing to natural difference than to education.

Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft attaches a great deal of importance to bodily strength, and argues that “strength of mind has in most cases been accompanied by superior strength of body” (*VRW* 107). Emphasising the homologous relationship between the mind and the body, she talks of the “education of the body” as well as of the mind (*VRW* 150). This argument is elaborated in the third chapter, which Ellison points out, is marked by Wollstonecraft’s dictum, “dependence of body naturally produces dependence of mind.”¹⁹² It is worth noting that the word “mind” is frequently used interchangeably with “soul,” especially when she tries to make a distinction with the body, for it is the sphere of the body that complicates the philosophical problem of agency.

Wollstonecraft scrutinises the notion of the soul in *The Rights of Woman* by critically reviewing Rousseau’s statement:

“Whencesoever girls derive this first lesson, it is a very good one. As the *body* is born, in a manner, before the *soul*, our first concern should be to cultivate the former; this order is common to both sexes, but the object of that cultivation is different. In the one sex it is the development of corporeal powers; in the other, that of personal charms. . . . Women certainly require as much strength as to enable them to move and act gracefully, and men as much address as to qualify them to act with ease. . . . And, in fact, almost all of them [women] learn with

¹⁹² Julie Ellison, ‘Redoubled Feeling: Politics, Sentiment, and the Sublime in Williams and Wollstonecraft’ in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* vol.20 eds. L.E. Brown and P.B.Craddock (Colleague Press, 1991), p.206.

reluctance to read and write; but very readily apply themselves to the use of their needles.” (*VRW* 149, 150).

In this context the “soul” does not signify the principle of “life” in man or animals, or that which is bestowed by God, used in a traditional Christian sense. Instead, it implies the mind or intellectual properties. The closest definition which *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives of this sort of soul is: “The principle of thought and action in man, commonly regarded as an entity distinct from the body; the spiritual part of man in contrast to the purely physical.”¹⁹³ The body here signifies a physical presence or material frame/ structure that “acts” according to its need. Even though Rousseau differentiates the “education of the body” by sex, he leaves the original body free from sexual difference. There was a general trend to deny sexual identity to the subject, and following that, Wollstonecraft declared that the neutral, rational subject has in essence no sex.¹⁹⁴

The inclination to isolate the “original” body from sexual traits is also observed in Rousseau’s statement at the beginning of Book 5 of *Emile*. He acknowledges that both women and men are of the same nature with respect to their capacity and bodily functions.

In everything not connected with sex, woman is man. She has the same organs, the same needs, the same faculties. The *machine* is constructed in the same way; its parts are the same; the one functions as does the other; the form is similar; and in whatever respect one considers them the difference between them is only one of more or less. In everything connected with sex, woman and

¹⁹³ See *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2.a

¹⁹⁴ Thomas Laqueur (1986), p.23.

man are in every respect related and in every respect different. (*Emile* 357)

Rousseau believes that woman's corporeal "machine" is constructed in the same way as man's except for some aspects connected with sex,¹⁹⁵ but in discussing gender difference, he tends to ignore the corporeal faculties as the basis of mental exertions, and asserts that the female body should be strengthened so as to move "gracefully." Wollstonecraft has sharply criticised this tendency: "the difference between strengthening the body, on which strength of mind in a great measure depends, and only giving it an easy motion, is very wide" (*VRW* 151). This is a pertinent remark, for Rousseau, when it comes to female education, takes away the premise that the body could be the ground for intellectual improvement. He gives women credit by raising their status above "a veritable automaton," and yet he adds that their education should be limited to "those that are suitable for [her] to know" (*Emile* 364).

What Wollstonecraft is challenging is not Rousseau's representation of the female body itself. Her ridicule of the Rousseauvian notion that the female soul "was fond of dress" in a pre-existent state (*VRW* 97), displays her uncompromising attitude to the attribution of gender traits to the physical features. She problematises Rousseau's idea of the soul which is sexualised. According to Wollstonecraft, Rousseau's sexualised "soul" or gender distinction ("the manly or the effeminate manner") is moulded by education.

Thus a robust or a delicate temperament, together with the strength or weakness attaching to it, often derives from the manly or the effeminate manner in which one has been raised rather than from the original constitution

¹⁹⁵ This idea perhaps has its root in his liberal theory put forward in his *A Discourse on Inequality*.

of the body. The same is true of the powers of the mind; and not only does education establish a difference between cultivated minds and those which are not, but it increases the differences among cultivated minds in proportion to their culture" (*Discourse* 105)

Rousseau's general philosophical observation on the "original" body and mind, as we can see, is not gender-specific. Wollstonecraft points out his contradiction, "if it be not philosophical to think of sex when the soul is mentioned, the inferiority must depend on the organs" (*VRW* 103). Her sceptical comment suggests that the only thing required of women to build intellectual strength is a firm body which can be attained by "industry" and physical "exercise" (*VRW* 183).

By setting the bodily organs of male and female on an equal footing, as Rousseau had done in principle, Wollstonecraft tries to redraw the social categories or hierarchy not by sex, class, or religious authority, but by "sweat," "blood," "industry," or "knowledge" (*VRW* 127). This gesture gives new privilege to the professional class and their accomplishments, no longer assessed by wealth, rank or manner, or sense of superiority.

It is of great importance to observe that the character of every man is, in some degree, formed by his profession. A man of sense may only have a cast of countenance that wears off as you trace his individuality, whilst the weak, common man has scarcely ever any character, but what belongs to the body; Society, therefore, as it becomes more enlightened, should be very careful not to establish bodies of men who must necessarily be made foolish or vicious by the very constitution of their profession. (*VRW* 87)

On the whole Wollstonecraft's approach to human excellence is strictly based on moral,

intellectual or physical meritocracy. It shares its basis with the enlightenment ideology that departed from both hereditary nobility and bourgeoisie and aimed at an ascendancy of the intellectual class, including those making a living from writing; Wollstonecraft herself was undeniably one of them.

Though Rousseau would have been indignant to be categorised with so “disreputable” a figure as La Mettrie,¹⁹⁶ there is no denying that these two French *philosophes*, as well as Wollstonecraft, were influenced by the same political milieu which resented social value measured by class or wealth, and they shared the same liberal idea that the “body” with its intellect intact should be the basis of fair evaluation. Although the association that La Mettrie makes between “delicacy” and “the fair sex” is the sweeping stereotype that Wollstonecraft wished to undermine, some of her ideas have resonance with La Mettrie’s assertion that lack of education reinforces women’s already degraded soul. In emphasising her point, Wollstonecraft consciously uses the trope of the body, stating that the property of an honest mechanic “is in his nervous arms.” With these arms the mechanic is “compelled to pull a strange rope at the surly command of a tyrannic boy, who probably obtained his rank on account of his family connections” (*VRM* 15). The body is symbolically compared to an organic machine, not merely because it requires nervous and muscular fibres, but because its quality lies in its operation. The relation between the mechanic and the tyrannic boy is defined by class, but she further underlines the importance of the body as a natural property possessed and fully utilised by the professional class. “Mental as well as bodily exertion is at first

¹⁹⁶ Aram Vartanian, ‘La Mettrie and Rousseau’ in *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* Vol.8, No.2 (1985), p.156. In this essay, Vartanian discusses the theme of guilt (in a Christian sense) persistent in the works of both Rousseau and La Mettrie. They share similar idea about primitive man holding the virtues of simplicity, ignorance and innocence.

irksome,” she points out, and she explains why “the many would fain let others both work and think for them” (*VRW* 182).

This allows room for a revaluation of human excellence in terms of a developing organism. Wollstonecraft did not believe that a ready-made spiritual soul bestowed upon any types of body, weak or strong, would sustain its quality. Her celebration of “bodily strength,” for example, is expressed in her discussion about genius. Contrary to what “superficial observers have inferred,” she argues, in most cases strength of mind has been accompanied by superior strength of body—natural soundness of constitution (*VRW* 107). Her idea that connects the physiological constitution with intellectual power may partly be indebted to Rousseau’s notion of the soul which grows after the body is born and La Mettrie’s theory of the mind, which he considers a part of the organic “machine.” Most importantly, medical discourse which prevailed in the late eighteenth century about what constitutes “intelligence” or the capacity to think must have had a definitive influence.

Physiological investigation focused on the nerve as the bridge between the philosophical/psychological inquiry into the soul and the anatomical concern with the brain. Therefore, the idea about the “sensorium” or “sensibility” was partly philosophical, and partly anatomical.¹⁹⁷ Albrecht von Haller was one of the first to examine the sensibility of an organism and its soul within the physiological system, and he is also renowned for introducing the theory of the irritability of muscular fibres. Wollstonecraft’s rhetorical appeal is dominated by these images. When it comes to “education” of the minds, it is the muscular and nervous “fibres” that have to be

¹⁹⁷ Karl M. Figlio, ‘Theories of Perception and the Physiology of Mind in the Late Eighteenth Century’ in *History of Science* XII (1975), pp.177-212.

strengthened (*VRW* 183). By preserving personal beauty, women's limbs and faculties are "cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves" (*VRW* 110, 111).

That spirit or soul is nothing more than the bodily organisation of matter is pivotal to the development of medical discourse in the early nineteenth century. Already in the late eighteenth century, when Wollstonecraft published her *The Rights of Woman*, the debates on mental activity and its relation to the brain were present among her social circle. Joseph Priestley whose books were published by Joseph Johnson, like Wollstonecraft, is one of the major figures devoted to exploring the operation of the mind as part of the bodily organism. His *Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism and Philosophical Necessity* (1778) concerns his materialistic idea. In 1788, a columnist reviewed Thomas Reid's *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* in Johnson's journal, *The Analytical Review* (1788), and he is right to stress Priestley's materialist position.

On the received principles of induction, he [Dr Priestley] asserts, that we ought to *ascribe the capacity of intelligence to matter*, as well as the property of gravitation. Thought he believed to arise necessarily from a certain organization of the brain, and, resting on this, he denies the existence of an immaterial principle.¹⁹⁸

If man is a product of his biomedical makeup, does he or she have free will? Can he or she be held responsible for his or her actions? Is consciousness the captain of the soul,

¹⁹⁸ See "Reid's *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*" reviewed in *The Analytical Review or History of Literature, Domestic and Foreign*. vol.1 (May to August 1788), p.147. Italics added.

or is it just a by-product of the brain?¹⁹⁹ These questions are in part answered by Reid's inquiry into the extent of human power. As I have mentioned in Chapter 1, he divides the power into the innate, and those faculties dependent on exercise which he calls "moral." By distinguishing the latter from the original animal faculties which, left alone, grow up like the trees of the forest, Reid is able to show that moral qualities have to be acquired and maintained by exertion. For Wollstonecraft, too, it is only by one's own exertion and "industry" that one can attain strength. Her writing is strikingly similar to Reid's theory in that she compares the human body to "shooting tendrils" or a "tree," that grows strong (*VRW* 183). The fact that Reid's theory is discussed in the *Analytical Review* is relevant, for Wollstonecraft herself contributed to it.²⁰⁰

In the same year this review came out, Joseph Johnson published John Brown's *Elements of Medicine* (1788) which will be more closely analysed in the next chapter. According to Janet Todd, Wollstonecraft probably read the treatise and was impressed with his work, after which she was able to make more sense about human ills or her own "nervous complaints." Her malaise, she thought, could be explained more by the "unnatural sedentary life of middle-class ladies" or too little external stimuli than by her sensitive "nerves."²⁰¹ The stimuli or what Brown called "exciting powers" have to be kept to a moderate degree, for the body with its "intellectual part" is necessarily affected by these powers. John Brown shares a similar materialist view with Priestley.

The property, on which both sets of [external and internal] powers act, may be named Excitability; and the powers themselves, Exciting Powers. By the word

¹⁹⁹ These questions were often posed by medical scientists and philosophers. See Roy Porter's essay, "Medical Science and Human Science in the Enlightenment" in *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth-Century Domains* eds. Christopher Fox, Roy Porter and Robert Wokler (Los Angeles and London: California UP, 1995), p.70.

²⁰⁰ Janet Todd (2000), p.138.

Body, is meant both the body simply so called, and also as endued with an intellectual part, a part appropriated to passion and emotion, or a soul: the usual appellation in medical writing is system (*Elements* Part I 4).

Brown bundles together the system of the nerves with “muscular contraction,” “sense of perception” and the “energy of the brain in thinking.” This does not make for a clear explanation of Wollstonecraft’s theory about reason, but it underlies her curious paradox. She acknowledges free will, as Reid does, but how is that possible if she premises this on the corporeal capacity? Does one need a strong “animal faculty” to begin with in order that one might have a stronger will for exertion?

2. Social Progress: Is human perfectibility possible?

There is a similar pattern of convolution in Wollstonecraft’s argument about instinct. In *The Rights of Woman*, there is almost a mimicry of La Mettrie’s notion that the “sensitive soul” resides in every organic machine, whether of animal or man, stating that she grants “brutes of every description a soul” (*VRW* 132). As I have explained in Chapter 1, La Mettrie claims that putting “man in the same class as them [animals] is to do him a great honour” for the former are endowed with fewer “instincts” than animals. His notion of “machine” became a nexus, as it were, of concepts such as “animal” or “man” so that they could be grouped together, pointing at the original and “natural” state of man prior to civilization.

Wollstonecraft largely upholds Rousseau’s theory of social progress. Amongst Rousseau’s works, *A Discourse on Inequality* which lambasts the growth of civilization and its corruption of natural goodness, comes nearest to upholding La Mettrie’s

²⁰¹ Janet Todd (2000), p.132.

argument that the human body is a self-sustaining organic mechanism. There are three major ideas in *Discourse* which she recuperates in *The Rights of Woman* and which are likely to have affected her opinion about “reason” in relation to society’s progress and civilization. Firstly, Rousseau’s idea about “desire” and “passions” inhibited a straightforward identification with the spontaneity or the “natural” urge of the body, thereby contradicting her instinctive “passions.” Unlike what Hobbes had believed, multiplied passions for Rousseau were “the product of society.” Rousseau believed that man in the state of nature possessed no excessive desire except for the purely physical impulse that drove him to procreate. Since primitive man could content himself with minimum needs, “nothing is more peaceable than man in his primitive state” (*Discourse* 115): “It is by the activity of the passions that our reason improves itself” (*Discourse* 89). Secondly, while acknowledging in passing that “the mind became enlightened and more industry improved” as society developed, Rousseau’s favour inclined towards the robustness of primitive man (*Discourse* 99), for he disdained the degenerate and “softened” body and excessive imagination of civilized man. Finally, Rousseau put an emphasis on “free-will” (*Discourse* 87) as man’s prerogative, which is different from earlier materialist thinking.

La Mettrie constantly makes analogies between man and animals in rejecting the assumption that animals, or in a sense man in the state of nature, are all ferocious (*MM* 20). By the same token, Rousseau foregrounds the “naturalness” of primitive men who were free, equal, self-sufficient and peaceful with little devouring desires:

I see in all animals only an ingenious *machine* to which nature has given senses in order to keep itself in motion and protect itself, up to a certain point, against everything that is likely to destroy or disturb it. I see exactly the same things in

the human *machine*, with this difference: that while nature alone activates everything in the operations of a beast, man participates in his own actions in his capacity as a free agent (*Discourse* 87, italics added).

Because of his robust health, primitive man was free from “the excess of idleness” and “the over-elaborate foods” (*Discourse* 84). Rousseau’s primitivism in some way echoes eighteenth-century medical ideas, typically expressed by George Cheyne. Cheyne had stated that the bodily constitutions of a generation are always more corrupt, infirm, and diseased, than those of an earlier, as they advance in time, implying that social progress necessarily weakens the bodily organs and their functions, and also because of “Luxury” and “Intemperance” (Cheyne 174). This is reiterated in S.A. Tissot’s *An Essay on the Disorders of People of Fashion* (1772). Like Cheyne, Tissot considers that the rural simplicity “dictated by nature” is an ideal situation for “our constitution” (*ED* 7). The deviation from simplicity was more and more observed among the citizens of his time, and with this change, he remarks, their health proportionately diminished (*ED* 8). People in high life, in particular, are said to “indulge with [food which is] more than is needful, which is less than what the working labourer requires.” This causes their stomachs to be affected “because the nerves are so,” and this condition, according to Tissot, “struggles the whole frame into disorder” (*ED* 14). Tissot’s classic idea that excess of food does harm to the bodily constitution is reiterated by Rousseau: “the ease of stimulating and gratifying our appetites and our senses, the over-elaborate foods of the rich, which inflame and overwhelm them with indigestion” and are means by which “the human soul is constantly tormented” (*Discourse* 84, 85).

Rousseau’s *Discourse* demonstrates the tensions between nature and civilization, freedom and society, or between the primitive state and the civilized state.

The model overturned Hobbesian notion of a “savage” people with violent passions and selfish desires.

Above all, let us not conclude with Hobbes that man is naturally evil just because he has no idea of goodness, that he is vicious for want of any knowledge of virtue [Hobbes introduced illogically] into the savage man’s care for his own preservation the need to satisfy a multitude of passions which are the product of society and which have made laws necessary. (*Discourse* 98)

Thus Rousseau uses the idea of innocence from a wider historical perspective than Locke. Innocence here is considered to be a significant trait of primitive man.

Wollstonecraft gives allowance to Rousseau’s assertion that the state of nature is preferable to civilization, stating that his arguments are “plausible” (*VRW* 83). However, she laments that he did not investigate further. If he had found out whether “the evils . . . were the consequence of civilization or the vestiges of barbarism” (*VRW* 84), she believes, “his mind would have darted forward to contemplate the perfection of man in the establishment of true civilization” (*VRW* 87). Yet she is not unaware of the “follies and vices” that civilization has produced, particularly in regard to women.

I once knew a weak woman of fashion, who was more than commonly proud of her delicacy and sensibility. She thought a distinguishing taste and puny appetite the height of all human perfection, and acted accordingly. I have seen this weak sophisticated being neglect all the duties of life, yet recline with self-complacency on a sofa, and boast of her want of appetite as a proof of delicacy that extended to, or perhaps, arose from, her exquisite sensibility. (*VRW* 112, 113)

Her equivocal position regarding the effects of civilization may largely be explained by

her attitude to the effeminate delicacy encouraged in civilized society and also by the notion of progress advanced in the enlightenment. She repeatedly attributes femininity or licentious features of a woman to education. It is absurd, she says, “that a girl is naturally a coquette” and that “a desire connected with the impulse of nature to propagate the species, should appear even before an improper education has, by heating the imagination, called it forth prematurely”(VRW 111).

La Mettrie and Rousseau have compared primitive man with contemporary man in favour of the former. Edward Young, who discussed the notion of genius, held a similar but more democratic view about social progress. In his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), he states that “human souls, thro’ all periods, are equal; that due care, and exertion, would set us nearer our immortal predecessors than we are at present; and he who questions and confutes this, will show abilities not a little tending toward a proof of that equality, which he denies.”²⁰² Wollstonecraft was also concerned with the makeup of genius and the favourable conditions for such an extraordinary quality to arise. In thinking about Newton, she is encouraged to believe that “a being of superior order” could be “accidentally caged in a human body,” but she does not accept that a female genius is only explained by “male spirits” (VRW 103). While Young discounts reason in thinking about a genius, she considers improvement and a rational mind to be equally important, for she demarcates a historical stage of “reason” and the stage preceding that rational stage. By stressing that reason is the prerogative of and exclusive to human beings, Wollstonecraft revised the cursory view of materialists who believed human instinct to be indistinguishable from animal instinct. The idea that

²⁰² Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition* ed. Edith J. Morley (London and New York: Manchester UP, 1918), p.10. Hereafter cited as *Conjectures* with page numbers in parentheses.

women are “the link which unites man with brutes” (*VRW* 104) was, to her, absurd.

In *The Rights of Men* she downplays the role of instinct defining it as “a congregate of sensations and passions”: “In what respect are we superior to the brute creation, if intellect is not allowed to be the guide of passion?” (*VRM* 31) She explores the notion of instinct in relation to the Burkean notion of the “inbred sentiments.”

In England we have not yet been completely emboweled of our natural entrails; we still feel within us, and we cherish and cultivate those inbred sentiments which are faithful guardians, the active monitors of our duty, the true supporters of all liberal and manly morals.

But Wollstonecraft inveighs against the notion of “inbred powers,” stating that appetites are the only perfect form of inbred powers she can discern, and “like instinct” they can be satisfied, yet are inherently different from “improvable reason” (*VRM* 33).

. . . the exercise of instinct and sensibility may be the step which they [brutes] are to take, in this life, towards the attainment of reason in the next; so that through all eternity they will lag behind man, who, why we cannot tell, had the power given him of attaining reason in his first mode of existence” (*VRW* 132).

This is why Wollstonecraft could not “agree with Mr.S[mellie] that instinct is only a lesser degree of reason.”²⁰³ She has often used the term “instinct” interchangeably with sensibility, as we can see in *The Rights of Men*: “This instinct, for I know not what other name to give it, has been termed *common sense*, and more frequently *sensibility*” (*VRM* 30). Thus it is natural for her to equate instinct with the impulse or the sensibility of the body, just as Rousseau had made an analogy between “the voice of the body” and

²⁰³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Analytical Review* (Volume VIII 1790) in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* vol.7 eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989), p.295.

“instinct” (*Emile* 286).

The greatest legacy of materialism from the earlier period must be the belief that “the reasoning faculty itself is a necessary result of instinct” (*Natural History* 145). William Smellie argued this in his *Philosophy of Natural History* (1790), which Wollstonecraft absolutely refused to accept. Sensibility or what Dr Johnson calls “the most exquisitely polished instinct,” for her is “still material” after being “[r]efined seventy times seven,” so “intellect dwells not there” (*VRW* 132). She would also have refuted Cheyne’s statement that the intellectual faculty has “animal Organs” (*EM* 52).

Yet she exalted “instinctive perceptions” calling it “natural morality,” when she reviewed Jacques-Henri Meister’s *On Natural Morality* (1788),²⁰⁴ stating that such a “hidden instinct” or “compassion” links our moral sentiments with “involuntary sensations.” Further, when she considers the “distinction of heroes” or “[p]eople of genius” and the “source of their undue power,” she is concerned about the “violence of their passions” as much as their intellectual capacity (*VRW* 107). She ascribes men’s superior judgement to the “grand passions” (*VRW* 179). Heat, fire or flames which are often the metaphors for passions occupy an ambivalent position; they can evoke the “excess” of feelings as compared with “the cool work of reason” (*VRW* 153), or they can also recall the essence of genius, “the heavenly fire” (*VRW* 120).

Wollstonecraft’s glamorisation of “passions” resonates with Julie’s assertion in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.

Cold reason has never achieved anything illustrious, and we triumph over passions only by opposing one to another. When the passion of virtue comes to

²⁰⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Analytical Review*. (Article XLI 1789) in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* vol. 7 eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler vol. 7 (London: William Pickering, 1989), p.101.

the fore, it alone dominates and keeps all the rest in a state of equilibrium. That is how the truly wise man is formed, who is alone capable of subduing them with themselves, as a pilot sails by adverse winds. (*Héloïse* 319)

If primitive “instinct” or “passions” could be an essential feature of genius, on an equal level with reason, to what extent does social progress explain the fundamental difference between man and animal? Bodily strength is necessary for mental development, but this idea, when associated with “instinct” as a privilege of animals, evokes the rude, unrefined or unpolished sensibility of primitive man. However the cult of genius was often associated with natural or “organic” progress rather than intellectual refinement in a civilised society. Edward Young’s organic metaphor of genius which “grows” is an interesting comparison with “*Imitations*” that are referred to as a kind of “*manufacture* wrought up by those *mechanics*” (*Conjectures* 7). Education, as is represented by the heroine of *Mary*, is no longer seen as the product of a series of lessons to make the pupil memorise everything, but as an organic process, involving the dynamic interaction of an individual with the world. Wollstonecraft’s justification for a statement such as, “the poetry written in the infancy of society, is most natural” is that such a poetry is the “transcript of immediate sensations, in all their native wildness and simplicity, when fancy, awakened by the sight of interesting objects, was most actively at work” (*OP* 7).

The absence of reason or intellectual development in the primitive state meant degradation to non-human standards, which probably affected Wollstonecraft’s attitude towards “instinct” and “passions.” As I have so far shown, she endorses these notions with mixed feelings. In her writings, therefore, bodily strength was often shifted to mean “mental” strength or firmness, thereby using the word more or less

metaphorically: “[t]he amiable weakness of his [or her] mind is a strong argument against its immateriality, and seems to prove that beauty relaxes the solids of the soul as well as the body” (*VRM* 46).

3. The Immortality of Soul

In the late eighteenth century, philosophical questions concerning the soul frequently involved physiological issues. Post-1750 investigators, according to Roy Porter, accentuated the qualitative distinctions they discerned between living and non-living bodies,²⁰⁵ so the “agency” could be defined not just in terms of free will or intelligence, but of life or the motive force of the body. According to John Brown, “If the property which distinguishes living from dead matter, or the operation of either of the two sets of powers [external and internal] be withdrawn, life ceases. Nothing else than the presence of these is necessary to life” (*Elements* I 4). Rousseau’s ontological inquiry is much indebted to medical ideas which perceive the cause of sensations to be “external” to one’s body rather than internal: “My sensations take place in me, since they make me sense my existence; but their cause is external to me, since they affect me without my having anything to do with it, and I have nothing to do with producing or annihilating them” (*Emile* 270). Rousseau’s philosophical argument goes further to undermine the boundary of the body, asking where “external” matter begins.

But if it is true that all matter senses, where shall I conceive the sensitive unity or the individual I to be? Will it be in each molecule of matter or in the aggregate bodies? Shall I put this unity equally in fluids and solids, in compounds and elements? There are, it is said, only individuals in nature. But

²⁰⁵ Roy Porter (1995), p.396.

what are these individuals? . . . The sensible parts are extended, but the sensitive being is indivisible and one. It cannot be divided; it is *whole*, or it is nothing." (*Emile* 279, italics added)

It can be inferred that Rousseau presupposed two categories of existence, one is an extendable matter, the body, and the other is an indivisible "whole," the soul. There is a relative separation between these two; as Rousseau notes, "the sensitive being is . . . not a body" (*ibid.*).²⁰⁶ In this sense, Rousseau follows the footsteps of Locke who considered that the idea of body "is an extended solid substance, capable of communicating motion by impulse" while calling soul "an immaterial spirit" which is "of a substance that thinks, and has a power of exciting motion in body, by will or thought."²⁰⁷ However, Rousseau, while acknowledging the separation, ascribes sensibility to both the body and the soul, thereby embracing the belief in the fusion of the body and soul. There is no doubt that the materialist philosophy which regarded matter as that which "contains the motive force which animates it and which is the immediate cause of all the laws of movement" (*TS* 49) was deeply ingrained in his mind, and, furthermore, that the very nature of sensibility that cannot be isolated from either matter or motive force may have caused him to use such ambivalent phraseology.

Wollstonecraft, though registering the effects that the body has on the mind, discredits materialist ideas about the body, saying that she was "inclined to laugh at

²⁰⁶ Rousseau differentiates "matter" ("all that I sense outside of me and which acts on my senses") from "bodies" ("all the portions of matter which I conceive to be joined together in individual beings"). (*Emile* 270).

²⁰⁷ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* ed. John W. Yolton (London: J.M.Dent, 1993), p.159. As a student of Thomas Willis, a physiologist, Locke based his notion of soul on an ambivalent agent that is both "immaterial" and of a "substance." I have said in Chapter 1, La Mettrie has focused on the materialist ideas of Locke to elaborate his own physiological theory. It could be argued that La Mettrie dismissed or ignored Locke's ambivalent side of this argument.

materialists" (*VRW* 185). She considers an "immortal soul" could be free from "mechanical laws" or "the shackles of matter" (*VRW* 116). There is profound resonance with Rousseau's statement about the "mortal body": "I aspire to the moment when, after being delivered from the shackles of the body, I shall be *me* without contradiction or division and shall need only myself in order to be happy." (*Emile* 293). Both Wollstonecraft and Godwin share the same Rousseauvian image of the body as that which "chains" the soul, as Rousseau questions, "Why is my soul subjected to my senses and chained to this body which enslaves it and interferes it?" (*Emile* 292)

We cannot help observing a close parallel between Wollstonecraft repugnance towards materialist thinking and Jacques Necker's statement about the soul in his *Of the Importance of Religious Opinions*, which she translated from French in 1788. For him, the soul should be located on a different level from the body: "[w]e ought to consider our senses as messengers, which bring to our mind new subjects of reflection; but they are in such a manner subordinate to the sublime part of ourselves," that he could not but refute those thinkers who "grant [the absolute empire] to exterior objects over the powers of our soul."²⁰⁸ Though it deals with theological issues, the statement is germane to Reid's scientific theory, which we discussed earlier. Following Necker's spiritualist theory, Wollstonecraft ventures to eliminate gender difference by sublimating the soul; "if woman be allowed to have an immortal soul, she must have, as the employment of life, an understanding to improve."²⁰⁹ By detaching the soul from the enervated female body, she hypothesises a whole new body on which reason and

²⁰⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Of the Importance of Religious Opinions* in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* vol.3 eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989), pp.97, 98.

²⁰⁹ As Janet Todd argues, the sexes were psychologically identical, basing this on Wollstonecraft's continuing religious sense of an immortal soul. See Janet Todd (2000),

understanding could be more readily secured. There is an element of irony, though, in our finding her assertion persuasive, for Wollstonecraft's theory of education is predicated upon the idea that the progression of the soul keeps abreast of "the education of the body."

And if the dignity of the female soul be as disputable as that of animals—if their reason does not afford sufficient light to direct their conduct whilst unerring instinct is denied—they are surely of all creatures the most miserable! and, bent beneath the iron hand of destiny, must submit to be a *fair defect* in creation (*VRW* 114).

The absence of rationality does not just occasion degradation in a secular sense. Wollstonecraft touches upon the theme of immortality in elaborating on the notion of the "soul," for she argues that she builds her "belief of the immortality of the soul" on the perfectibility of human reason. Calling reason "the simple power of improvement," she negates human perfection in the terrestrial realm. She believes, if there is such a thing as perfection, his or her existence will cease to continue "after the dissolution of the body" (*VRW* 122), inadvertently following the deistic philosophy of Thomas Paine.

I trouble not myself about the manner of future existence. I content myself with believing, even to positive conviction, that the Power that gave me existence is able to continue it, in any form and manner he pleases, either with or without his body; and it appears more probable to me that I shall continue to exist hereafter, than that I should have had existence, as I now have, before that existence began. (*AR* 76)

According to Wollstonecraft, "life is merely an education" (*VRW* 178), for it is to

“another step of existence” that human beings bring themselves after their deaths. Her notion of perfectibility extends to the afterlife, and material existence for her is merely “a state of infancy.” Contemplating in this frame of mind, one may be persuaded to believe that the “powers of the soul that are of little use here [in this world], and, probably, disturb our animal enjoyments” or “happy” life are worth exerting. She asks herself, “why should we injure our health by close study?” and neglect “moderation in every pursuit”? To this question, she answers,

the mind gains strength by the exercise, sufficient, perhaps, to comprehend the answers which, in another step of existence, it may receive to the anxious questions it asked, when the understanding with feeble wing was fluttering round the visible effects to dive into the hidden cause (*ibid.*).

It is the capacity of “passions” to open and enlarge their minds, she says, that explains “why men have superior judgement, and more fortitude than women” (*VRW* 179). She contradicts herself when she endorses the “passions” at the expense of the body. The immortal soul and its improvement justifies the intellectual pursuits which could “injure our health.” What the body requires and restrains only “produce more moderate and permanent happiness.” It makes it sound as though “ease and prosperity” or earthly happiness do not encourage one to “rise above the common standard” or attain “great virtues” (*VRW* 178, 179).

On the whole, Wollstonecraft censures “passions” when there are not accompanied by reason: “they are only brutal when unchecked by reason” (*VRW* 200). However, when her imagination flies over to that boundary which divides life and death, she is inclined to disembody the “passions” and “soul” by immortalising them. As we have seen above,

the soul takes different shapes in various contexts. Wollstonecraft shares the ambivalence about the physicality/spirituality of the soul with Rousseau. At the same time, medical discourse in the late eighteenth century has certain rhetorical ramifications. The soul or the “mind” constituted a physical entity which operated as a nervous system within the realm of the body, which therefore gave sufficient justification for intelligence to be grounded in bodily strength. However, the symbolic frailty of the body in a civilized society somehow weakened this principle, for the body weakens as society progresses. The body becomes a malleable metaphor; it grows with the soul, it causes disruption in the mind, and it also defines a line between life and death, as if the body “cages” the soul from attaining a greater virtue.

It is not directly relevant to investigate Wollstonecraft’s religious belief, but her references to “another step” of life, “God” and “immortality” suggest her belief in an existence other than “this world.” Because of her equivocal view about the soul, her “God” is also ambiguous. Wollstonecraft contemplates the idea of God within the human capacity for reason: “the conduct of an accountable being must be regulated by the operations of its own reason; or on what foundation rests the throne of God?” (*VRW* 105).

When that wise Being who created us and placed us here, saw the fair idea, He willed, by allowing it to be so, that the passions should unfold our reason, because he could see that present evil would produce future good. (*VRW* 83)

It is less in the religious than in the philosophical sense that she uses the word “God.” It is used as a point of reference to show the existence of a spiritual being.

While passion has to be constantly checked by reason, she considers it to be vital for raising virtues above the common standard. Not only this, but passion is also

required to perpetuate affection. Her favourable view on affections compares with her criticism against “momentary flashes of sensibility.” The most difficult task in the education of both sexes, she asserts, is to broaden the understanding, while keeping the heart “warmed by the generous juices of spring” and preventing the education from “[drying] up the feelings by employing the mind in investigations remote from life” (*VRW* 135). It was this balance between the hot—“warm heart” and the cold—“cool reason” that she wished to maintain. Only that balance she was convinced would enable man to progress towards perfectibility.

6

**Political Empiricism in
Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Historical and
Moral View of the French Revolution***

As I have observed in the previous chapter, strength of mind for Wollstonecraft is founded on a robust body or organs, and with a proper education she believed that women could exercise as much intellectual power as men. Therefore when she acknowledges bodily frailty in women, she is making concessions to the general belief that they are not in reality capable of this “arduous task” of thinking and “are wanting a due proportion of reflection and self-government.” She castigates women’s delicate and often “contingent” sensibility (*VRW* 136). In the political debate in the 1790s, this image of the female body was transposed into the volatile “body” of the radical movement during the French Revolution.

As Dorinda Outram has argued, so much had the eighteenth century and the Revolution itself succeeded in charging the body with meaning, that the debate on the Revolution had collapsed previously external moral grids, such as ideas of moral vice and virtue, on to the body itself.²¹⁰ The image of bodily passions, for example, is applied to represent the unruly mob and their energy. Passions are not only morally ambiguous for individuals, but perceived as a major political issue for an entire society. Edmund Burke is regarded as one of the precursors of this conviction.

²¹⁰ Dorinda Outram (1989), p.51.

Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection.²¹¹

Furthermore Burke associates “passions” with “appetites,” which, for Wollstonecraft, also signify a highly impulsive and non-rational part of human nature which has to be controlled. In Chapter 4, I discussed Wollstonecraft’s ambivalent view of the body as a problem of self-government. Interestingly this volatile image of the body reverberates with Burke’s political trope, that individual passion has to be controlled and subdued through the “firmness” of the state: “the natural progress of the passions, from frailty to vice, ought to be prevented by a watchful eye and a firm hand” (*Reflections* 251). Both *The Rights of Woman* and *Mary* stress the necessity of the independent status of the individual mind. The heroine of the novel *Mary*, for example, could easily forget her appetite when she was engaged in deep reflection. Wollstonecraft acknowledges bodily strength as the precondition of intellectual development, but in her early works she also wants to sever the rational mind from the voluptuous or sensual body. However, in later works such as *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), she takes a more indulgent view of sensibility and the passions, and is less strict about the severance of the mind from the body. *A Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*,²¹² which was produced in the period between these texts, *The Rights of Woman* and *A Short Residence*, may mark a watershed in her writing career, especially

²¹¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) ed. Conor Cruise O’Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p.151. Hereafter cited as *Reflections* in parentheses with page numbers.

²¹² Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution in The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* vol.6 eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London:

in the way she perceived the sensibility of the body.

Nerve theory which stresses the constant interaction of the body and soul emphasises the functional integrity of the organism, and the degree to which this organic theory influenced the debate on the French Revolution is considerable. In Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), the holistic image of feudal society is, for example, compared to the "whole original fabric" (*Reflections* 192). Foucault addresses the analogy between the human body and the political unit underlying the familiar image of a corporealized state made up of "head," "organs," and "members." He explicates the concern with the "body politic" as a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge.²¹³ In this chapter I would like to explore the rationale behind Wollstonecraft's suspicion about the "mass" and their capacity to control and knowledge. Firstly, I will examine Wollstonecraft's use of the metaphor of the body-politic that is pivotal to her political debate on the French Revolution by comparing it with that of Burke. Secondly, I will discuss the newly emerging notion of "empiricism," and finally, I will deal with the concept of medical intervention. These issues are particularly relevant in studying the image of the physiological body adopted by political pamphleteers such as Burke in his *Reflections* and Helen Maria Williams in her *Letters Written in France*.²¹⁴

1. Organic vs. Mechanical Society

William Pickering, 1989). Hereafter cited as *FR* in parentheses with page numbers.

²¹³ Michel Foucault, (1979), p.28.

²¹⁴ Helen Maria Williams, *Letters Written in France in the Summer 1790* (Oxford:

While Burke uses the image of an organic unity bound by blood, and knitted together by natural instincts and affections to naturalize unequal property and social hierarchy,²¹⁵ Wollstonecraft and Helen Maria Williams show that the Burkean ideal of such a hierarchical society is only possible with the support of the mass which carries out the mechanical function. What I wish to focus on here is not merely the disparity between the ways in which Burke and Wollstonecraft or Williams use the image of the body-politic, but also the shared rhetorical device that views the body-politic or “humanity” as an organic entity.

Burke exalts the hereditary system of “what they have received from their ancestors” and “what is due to their posterity,” and elevates it to a Gothic symbolism of transmigrating spirit that is renovated in “new organs”: “The spirit transmigrates; and, far from losing its principle of life by the change of its appearance, it is renovated in its new organs with the fresh vigour of a juvenile activity” (*Reflections* 248). Burke is confident that however much blood is shed by “most dreadful civil war” and “massacres” the revolutionary people of France “have not slain the mind” of France (*Reflections* 137). Similarly England as an organic entity is alluded to and its robustness is depicted in the following passage:

At both those periods [of the Restoration and Revolution in England] the nation had lost the bond of union in their ancient edifice, they did not however, dissolve the whole fabric. On the contrary, in both cases they regenerated the deficient part of the old constitution through the parts which were not impaired. They kept these old parts exactly as they were, that the part recovered might be

Woodstock Books, 1989). Hereafter cited as *Letters* in parentheses with page numbers.

²¹⁵ Elizabeth Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics 1716-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p.111.

suiting to them. They acted by the ancient organized states in the shape of their old organization, and not by the *organic molecule* of a disbanded people.

(*Reflections* 106).

This allusion is reminiscent of Cartesian dualism, that the spirit can be divisible from the body. As long as the spirit survives or “transmigrates,” the body or the organic members of the body in different shapes will be given life by the immortal spirit. To prove the point, Burke explains that in the sixteenth century France recovered and “emerged from the longest and most dreadful civil war that ever was known in any nation” (*Reflections* 137).

Wollstonecraft attempts to demystify the operation by unmasking the reality of the feudal system, and by pointing out that the luxuries of the monarchs were barely supported by the labour of the poorer classes. She addresses Burke, “then you must have seen the clogged wheels of corruption continually oiled by the sweat of the labourious poor, squeezed out of them by unceasing taxation” (*VRM* 39). Similarly, a radical, Helen Maria Williams asserts the artificiality of feudalism.

But I now hear that, instead of their new attempt to form the great machine of society upon a simple principle of general amity upon the FEDERATION of its members, they ought to have repaired the feudal wheels and *springs*, by which their ancestors directed its movements. (*Letters* 220)

The idealised picture of elastic energy spontaneously arising from the old feudal state is thus slighted. Williams ridicules the cowardly attitude of Burke in shrinking from experimenting on the machine of society. In Burke’s self-sustaining system of the body-politic, its health was predicated upon the “spring,” the energy source as well as the checking device of moderation, since he states, “This distemper of remedy, grown

habitual, relaxes and wears out, by a vulgar and prostituted use, the spring of that spirit which is to be exerted on great occasions" (*Reflections* 154). *The Oxford English Dictionary* has a meaning close to his usage: "the quality or capacity of springing; the power inherent in, or possessed by, a thing of spontaneously resuming or returning to its normal state or bulk when pressure or other force is withdrawn; elastic energy or force; elasticity." However the context in which Williams uses this term redirects our thoughts to another meaning given by the *OED*, "An elastic contrivance or mechanical device, usually consisting of a strip or plate of steel (or a number of these) suitably shaped or adjusted, which, when compressed, bent, coiled, or otherwise forced out of its normal shape, possesses the property of returning to it." This device was perhaps more pervasive in the radical arguments to refute the royalist assessment.

According to Burke, the organs which constitute the material parts of society are interpreted as being subjugated by the "spiritual" head of state, which is the monarch with sovereign power. Wollstonecraft is critical of the spirituality of the ruling class which Burke presents, calling it "a kind of mysterious instinct," or the "subtle magnetic fluid, that runs round the whole circle of society" (*VRM* 49). Again, in *The Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft inveighs against Burke's organic metaphor of the British constitution not because she rejects the organic metaphor of the body-politic altogether, but because his representation is to her both inaccurate and mystifying.

Burke invites us to see the naturalness of political hierarchy by strictly dividing the head of the state from the citizens, equated with the mind and "passions" respectively. Wollstonecraft however vindicates the rights of men to rule themselves as a corporate body. This clearly follows the Rousseauvian ideal of collective citizens who share in sovereign power: "Each one of us puts into the community his person and all

his powers under the supreme direction of the general will; and as a body, we incorporate every member as an indivisible part of the whole.”²¹⁶ Rousseau’s definition of the body-politic deviates from Burke’s, for the latter strongly believed in the major function that the head of the state, or the mind, plays when conceiving the term body-politic. Rousseau on the other hand states that “[t]he public person thus formed by the union of all other persons was once called the city, and is now known as the *republic* or the *body politic*” (*Social Contract* 61).

Wollstonecraft’s approach provides a strong parallel with Rousseau’s in that she attempts to expose the delusion of Burke’s political ideal, that hierarchical society provides the organic-like, self-sustaining system that generates political harmony within. I want to show that her view ultimately projects a voice favourable to the Brunonian system of health management in that it scientifically reaches true *self*-management. Yet, while celebrating the liberation of the French people from the yoke of despotism, and showing a degree of faith in the republican body-politic even without the “external” agent in managing or checking licentious freedom, she cannot wholeheartedly entrust them to “manage” their own political affairs.

2. John Brown’s Empiricist Approach

The chief objective of progressives like Wollstonecraft and Williams was to strip away, in the imagination of the reader, the “rust of antiquity” that protected social hierarchies. They attempted to discredit Burke’s representation of hierarchical body designated by the hereditary ties, thereby giving agency back to the people. Republicanism and

²¹⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract* (1762) trans. Maurice Cranston (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p.61. Hereafter cited as *Social Contract* in parentheses with page numbers.

individualism gained ascendancy not only among political radicals, but also in medical culture. One of the Brunonian physicians, Robert Jones, severely criticised the medical community of Edinburgh which turned into “interested corporations” breeding prejudice in philosophy. Brunonian physicians believed in the individual’s power to make independent judgments. If the full implications of the inductive philosophy were realised, Jones wrote, “a great part of mankind would find themselves qualified not only for making improvements, but discoveries.”²¹⁷

Brown’s application of the model of inductive inquiry to medicine follows a certain procedure. If the body is inclined to be in an “asthenic” condition, defective of stimulation, and is not “sufficiently invigorated by the stimulant operation of corporeal or mental exercise,” one is recommended to take “a dose of strong liquor” or “opium” (*Elements* Part I 28). He usually starts with examining the simple phenomena of health; he then considers the powers which operate on men in that state, and next, deviations from the healthy state; and finally, he moves on to disease itself.²¹⁸ Newtonian induction taught these physicians that similar effects always implied similar causes. That is why Brunonianism could function empirically, sidestepping authority. On the other hand, because judgment is made by each individual practitioner, his diagnosis can result in dispute with another. One practitioner may conclude that the patient is in an asthenic condition while another may think otherwise. Hence, if the patient should die, the responsibility that the physician has to take is enormous, and the death is controversial. But, as Thomas Beddoes wrote in his edition of *Elements of*

²¹⁷ Robert Jones, *An Inquiry into the State of Medicine, on the Principles of Inductive Philosophy, with an Appendix Containing Cases and Observations* (Edinburgh: T. Longman and T. Cadell, London: C. Elliott, 1781), p. 179.

²¹⁸ Michael Barfoot, ‘Brunonianism Under the Bed: An Alternative to University Medicine in Edinburgh in the 1780s’ in *Medical History*, Supplement No. 8 (1988), p. 33.

Medicine, this did not prevent Brown from committing himself to the advancement of knowledge at the expense of the life of the patient (*Elements* lxvi). Beddoes relates a story of a student of medicine, Mr Isaacson, who was seized with a fever (*Elements* lxxvii-lxxiv). He emphasises that this took place “during the heat of contention between the opposers and defenders of the new [Brunonian] system” triggered by the death of another student, and he gives details of how the wavering nurse who attended the patient had to be persuaded to follow the plan of curing the asthenic condition without taking recourse to the authoritative treatment of bleeding, which Brown believed could only do harm to a patient with a debilitating condition. The medication proved successful, but this case only demonstrates the high risk taken in venturing to suggest alternative therapy to “bleeding and other evacuant antiphlogistic means,” which were the common methods of treating fever.

Just like the new inductive system of Brown which attempted to empower the individual physician to give his own diagnosis, Wollstonecraft and Williams tried to recuperate independent thought and judgement which were buried under the beautiful “drapery” hung by Burke: “I wish to hunt out of their lurking holes; and to show you [Burke] to yourself, stripped of the gorgeous drapery in which you have enwrapped your tyrannic principles” (*VRM* 60). Naturally, Williams and Wollstonecraft are both in favour of scientific empiricism. Williams, for example, states that she has “always been told that the improvement of every science depends upon experiment.” She further defends the Revolution by asking “Why should they not be suffered to make an experiment in politics?” (*Letters* 220). Williams’ exhortation to political experiments is the manifestation of the most salient characteristic of medical and political culture at the

time, its tendency to “desacrilize the body.”²¹⁹

Brunonianism presupposes that the balance between excess and defect of passions is the key to health management, and both Williams and Wollstonecraft emphasise this point, that moderation of stimulus is required in both the physiological body and body-politic. The utility of the energy of the passions is commended by Wollstonecraft. While Burke associates passions with “unservicable” or “noxious” energies (*Reflections* 268), Wollstonecraft is convinced that “the same energy of character, which renders a man a daring villain, would have rendered him useful to society, had that society been well organized.”²²⁰

The individual’s life was also increasingly becoming the object of experiment. It was conceived as something more than a set of physical responses and experiences. This way of looking at life is strongly reflected in Wollstonecraft’s approval of the gradual improvement which medicine and philosophy have made in the past. As to the French Revolution, she paints a bloody picture of the sacrificed victims of medical experiments in order to show the dire consequences of political experiments.

Like the empirics, who bled a patient to death to prevent a mortification from becoming fatal, the tyrants of the earth have had recourse to cutting off the heads, or torturing the bodies of those persons who have attempted to check their sway, or doubt their omnipotence. (*FR* 229)

This fear is later reiterated in *A Short Residence in Sweden* (1796), when she denounces Danish men who drank “a glass of the criminal’s blood, as an infallible remedy for the

²¹⁹ Dorinda Outram, (1989), p.49.

²²⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* vol.6 eds. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989), p.323. Hereafter cited as *Residence* in parentheses with page numbers.

apoplexy" (*Residence* 323). She uses the word "empiricism" to describe this incident, but only perjoratively. In this context the word is used in a common eighteenth-century medical sense to suggest quakery. Although she is sceptical of empirical methods in both *A Historical and Moral Views of the French Revolution* and *A Short Residence in Sweden*, she does concede that the accumulation of scientific findings contributes to improvements in the medical as well as in the political arena:

But, though thousands have perished the victims of empirics, and of despots, yet the improvements made both in medicine and moral philosophy have kept a sure, though gradual pace.—And, if men have not clearly discovered a specific remedy for every evil, physical, moral and political, it is to be presumed, that the accumulation of experimental facts will greatly tend to lessen them in future (*FR* 229).

Thus both Williams and Wollstonecraft take issue with Burke's static image of the body-politic which prioritises the head over the body and presupposes the interchangeability of its "organs" or "organic moleculeae." For them the organs are essential parts of life as much as the "spirit." In other words, their mechanical trope not only attacked the optimism of Burkean conservatism, but also salvaged the metaphorical body as the prerequisite part of the whole.

3. John Brown's Interventionist Approach

The body had long been understood as an instrument or "organ" through which emotions of various kinds are excited by external stimuli. In Wollstonecraft's *A Short Residence in Sweden*, there are some textual echoes from Godwin's musical metaphor of the body: "every beauteous feeling and emotion excites responsive sympathy, and the

harmonized soul sinks into melancholy, or rises to extasy, just as the chords are touched, like the aeolian harp agitated by the changing wind" (*Residence* 271). This is representative of the fundamental idea introduced by nerve theory, that one's physical well-being or its condition is dependent on factors both internal and external to the body which directly affects the nerves. Instead of codifying these factors into internal and external components, the classification of "natural" or "non-natural" adopted by Outram are much more suited to illustrating the "collapse" of the moral criteria on to the body. The concept of mental and bodily well-being or moral virtue shifted from something regulated or controlled by another party to something that every individual has to strive for and be responsible for.²²¹ One could well denominate factors such as diet, drink, exercise or indolence as "external," for these things seem to be objectively chosen by each person, but the primary reason why Outram has avoided the use of the term "external" factors is because, though they are "stimulants" or factors external to man, the "appetites," an excess of which is considered as vice, are so intimately connected with both "internal" and "external" factors that this demarcation becomes inadequate.

Based on nerve theory, many eighteenth-century medical men confounded the "natural" and "non-natural" factors which affected the physical and mental well-being of man. This is also true for Brown, who writes,

Temperature particularly affects the surface of the body; diet, the stomach and bowels; the blood and other fluids their respective vessels; labour and rest both the vessels and muscular fibres; passion and meditation, the brain; all these affect the parts mentioned (each that upon which its action is exerted) more than any other equal part. (*Elements* Part I 40, 41)

²²¹ Dorinda Outram (1989), p.48.

Temperature and diet may be thought of as “external” but the remaining factors, “blood,” “labour” or “passion” do not squarely fit into either category of external or internal cause. Passions were increasingly united, as it were, with various organic functions and required the same degree of attention as did diet or exercise. Diseases or excessive passions can be cured by controlling the quantity of stimulants of food, exercise, alcohol or opium. It is worth citing here a brief case history of Brown’s treatment of his gout which best illustrates the Brunonian system.

In 1771 Brown suffered his first attack of gouty arthritis. The disease followed then, as now, an erratic clinical course, and its origin and treatment were poorly understood. Brown went on a strict vegetarian diet and avoided alcoholic beverages in accordance with the accepted belief that gout was an inflammatory or phlogistic disease, occurring in people with excessive vigour. . . . Dissatisfied, he dropped the food restrictions and went back to his meat and alcohol, believing that perhaps gout arose out of weakened constitution. This coincided with the onset of an inter-critical period common in gout. Brown remained free of acute attacks for a period of several years, and naturally claimed success for his treatment. It kindled his enthusiasm.²²²

This is clearly an exemplary case of treating what Brown calls an “asthenic” (defective stimulation) condition. On the other hand, excessive passions or “the *noxious* exciting powers” which produce sthenic diseases, are “the remedies of asthenic; and those which produce asthenic, are the remedies of the sthenic” (*Elements* Part II 35, italics added).

²²² Gunter B. Risse, “The Brownian System of Medicine: Its Theoretical and Practical Implications” in *Acta Academiae Internationalis Historiae Medicinae* 5, 1 (Oxford, New York, London and Paris: Pergamon Press, 1970), p.47.

Although he has been criticised for plagiarising William Cullen's ideas,²²³ Brown's belief in promoting the self-help system of therapy may have appealed to the reader at a time when the public attitude towards the principle of individualism was becoming much more welcoming. Brown regards life as "solely the effect of stimulus; which produces disease in proportion to its excess or defect" (*Elements* Part I 31). He believed that the environment and internal circulation shape and condition the activities of the organism, but denies the existence of a healing power of nature. His theory is strictly stoical and systematic, for he does not believe in leaving bodily activities to their "natural" course. Health has to be rigorously pursued and carefully "managed" according to certain rules.

Managing health was part of Wollstonecraft's life as well, and this, for instance, is observed from her conscious adjustment to her surrounding environment in *A Short Residence*. She is determined to "seek for health" after contracting a fever in Norway, and is careful to note what kind of effects the non-natural factors have on her body. Like a professional practitioner, she judges that "the good effect of the various waters which invalids are sent to drink, depends . . . more on the air, exercise and change of scene, than on their medicinal qualities" (*Residence* 281), tacitly approving the vital principle of excitability, that sense, motion and passions are produced by a mechanical impulse of the nerve. In another instance, Wollstonecraft, believing it crucial to "treat their children, and manage their sick properly," attempts to persuade the women in Tønsberg that "they injured their children by keeping them too warm" (*Residence* 284), but her attempt is

²²³ John Thomson, *An Account of the Life, Lectures and Writings of William Cullen M.D.*, vol.2 (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859), p.224. Thomson assessed that there was nothing new in Brown's thinking, claiming that the "novelty of the terms . . . the simplicity of the views . . . and the ease with which a knowledge of these could be attained."

inhibited by “custom.” Adjusting the bodily temperature and dietary consumption was considered as a precaution for any nervous related disease. While censuring the indulgent mothers whom Wollstonecraft encountered during the tour, she celebrates the Danish queen, Caroline Matilda, whose maternal character is praised for her “management of her son”: “she used to bathe him herself every morning; insisted on his being loosely clad; and would not permit his attendants to injure his digestion, by humouring his appetite” (*Residence* 321).

Brunonian therapy does not wholly disapprove of the sthenic condition, or too much passion. Abundance of blood and heat is a great stimulus” (*Elements* Part III 183), and “bleeding,” for this condition, “is the most powerful of all remedies.” The next place to bleeding in the Brunonian system ranks cold, for “[h]eat is always hurtful” (*Elements* Part II 2). Of course, to treat a sthenic disease, one should reduce excessive excitement by the application of debilitating measures, but for Brown passions themselves are not entirely malignant, though too much of them will become “noxious.”

In her *Letters Written in France*, Williams points out that this balance is crucial, for she does not wholly dismiss the “passions” as dangerous. This is demonstrated in her trope of navigation. She maintains that there is a possibility “within the compass of human ability to form a system of politics . . . like a modern ship of discovery.” She says that this ship is

built upon principles that defy the opposition of the tempestuous elements (“and passions are the elements of life”—) instead of yielding to their fury makes them subservient to its purpose, and sailing sublimely over the untracked ocean, unites those together whom nature seemed for ever to have separated, and throws a line of connection across the divided world. (*Letters*

222, italics added)

The italicised sentence is particularly significant in that it shows Williams's avowal of "passions" as part of life, unlike Burke, who considered passions to be destructive properties of the body. Passions are compared to the tumultuous ocean through which a ship embarks on a journey of discovery, implying that passions are not to be controlled, but can in fact be "subservient to" some purpose.

While Brown and other Brunonian physicians believed that the health balance of the human organism can be maintained by means of stimulating or debilitating measures, Burke used the same rhetoric to discredit its virtue. Deliberately making an analogy between the body-politic and the physiological body, Burke naturalises a certain static condition of a society as perfectly healthy, which is inconceivable in the Brunonian system. According to Burke,

Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to *a permanent body* composed of transitory parts; wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, moulding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old, or middle-aged, or young, but in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenour of perpetual decay, fall renovation, and progression. (*Reflections* 120)

Brown perceives health as only sustainable as a momentary equilibrium with no fixed position, whereas Burke's image of the body is permanent and unchangeable. The body-politic of the feudal system, Burke believed, is best left as it is. He has recourse to medical language and likens the revolution of this system to "the practice of making the extreme medicine of the constitution its daily bread" (*Reflections* 154). He accuses the

revolutionaries of staging the spectacle of massacres before the eyes of the Parisians, in order “to stimulate their cannibal appetites” (*Reflections* 249). There is a strong parallel between the Revolution and the negative effect which abundant stimulants have on the body. Burke’s rhetoric is most effective when he sarcastically calls it “remedy”: “[t]his distemper of remedy, grown habitual, relaxes and wears out, by a vulgar and prostituted use, the *spring* of that spirit which is to be exerted on great occasions” (*Reflections* 154, italics added). Just as an organic body functions with the power of the spring, Burke perceives the spring to be the prime mover of society.

His derisive view of medicine justifies the harmonious state of “things as they are,” and, just like a suspicious patient, he denies the need for medical attention. The self-sustaining system is justified by his claim that in the old constitution “you had that action and counteraction which, in the natural and in the political world, from the reciprocal struggle of discordant powers, draws out the harmony of the universe.” Furthermore, he entrenches his conservatism by acknowledging the healing power of nature. The community was “happily composed,” because

they make all change a subject of compromise, which *naturally begets moderation*; they produce temperaments, preventing the sore evil of harsh, crude, unqualified reformations; and rendering all the headlong exertions of arbitrary power, in the few or in the many, for ever impracticable. (*Reflections* 122, italics added)

According to this view, moderation is naturally arrived at, and medical intervention is made redundant.

In the feudal system, Burke argues, no individual or group is strong enough or qualified to pull down the foundations of a noble and venerable castle (*Reflections* 121) or the castle-prison. He also boasts of Newgate, the English

counterpart of the Bastille: “We have prisons almost as strong as the Bastile [sic]” (*Reflections* 179). As Elizabeth A. Bohls has argued, one way in which the aesthetics of the ruin abetted the conservatism of the picturesque was by downplaying human agency.²²⁴

Burke made it seem that hierarchy did not mean “enforcement” or the obedience to sublime authority by making “kings into companions” and “power gentle.” Burke laments that “All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life . . . are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason” (*Reflections* 171). In fact Burke’s distrust of enlightenment culture was not only directed towards reason or individual rights, but also towards the empiricist approach which is typified by the interventionist therapy such as has been observed in the Brunonian system.

3. The Body and Body-Politic

The body-politic was conceived by Rousseau as that which could be strengthened, or made vulnerable to various physical weaknesses such as “convulsion,” “indulgence” or even “disease”:

The body politic, no less than the body of a man, begins to die as soon as it is born, and bears within itself the causes of its own destruction. Either kind of body may have a constitution of a greater or less robustness, fitted to preserve it for a longer or shorter time. (*Social Contract* 134)

On the other hand, the body, in progressive “enlightenment” thought, was a rhetorical tool for philosophers to envision liberation from such “self-denial” (*FR* 22). Burke’s

²²⁴ Elizabeth Bohls, (1995), p.120.

insistence on the “spirit” of feudalism and its immortality is refuted in Wollstonecraft’s *A Historical and Moral View* (1794). Perhaps with a degree of cynicism, she calls Burke’s perfect state the “present imperfect state of society” in which the “imagination, continually tantalized, becomes the inflated wen of the mind, draining off the nourishment from the vital parts” (ibid.). This statement is made on the basis that “men become vicious in the same proportion as they are obliged, by the defects of society, to submit to a kind of self-denial, which ignorance, not morals, prescribes.” In place of “these evils” she welcomes “a new spirit” which has gone forth to “organise the perfect body-politic” (ibid.). For Wollstonecraft the court is no longer a part of the body but a “dying savage” who is “mortally wounded by his enemy” (FR 61). The new spirit and its enthusiasm “extended itself like thought from one end of the kingdom to the other” (ibid.).

In *A Historical and Moral View*, Wollstonecraft gives a medical diagnosis to the political culture of France, namely examining the collectivity of the nation as one body, as Rousseau had done. Outram has shown the usefulness of approaching a political debate through a history of the body. The French Revolution, she says, was the re-creation of a public sphere which for centuries had been dominated and defined by two key concepts: by images of the body-politic and of the king’s body (or the queen’s).²²⁵ However, in *A Historical and Moral View*, the king’s body is alienated from the corporate body. Quoting from Thomas Christie’s letter, Wollstonecraft stresses that the king “remained ALONE in the midst of the nation, occupied with the establishment of concord” (FR 71). Not only is he left alone, but he is degraded to become an “instrument” which proves useless when the object is achieved. By

²²⁵ Dorinda Outram (1989), p.4.

separating the king from the nation, and dispelling the “pleasing illusion” or the beautification of the king, she is able to desacralise the king’s body:

The person of the king, in itself very disgusting, was rendered more so by gluttony, and a total disregard of delicacy, and even decency in his apartments: and, when jealous of the queen, for whom he had a kind of devouring passion, he treated her with great brutality, till she acquired sufficient finesse to subjugate him. (*FR* 73)

Wollstonecraft reiterates the image of the degenerate state of society caused by the dissipation of the monarch. Rather than elevating the king to the sublime station, she debases him to a creature prone to “gluttony” and sexual appetites. A century before, she believes, the people “would have submitted, with brutal acquiescence, to the majestic WILL of the king, without daring to scan it’s import,” but in her view things have changed. People “recognizing their own dignity, they insisted, that all authority, which did not originate with them was illegal and despotic” (*FR* 37).

The French Revolution is then represented as a “natural” (*FR* 51) reaction of the body-politic, for the people no longer wished to rely on the monarch for the management of their own country. Though she holds a partially favourable view on civilization, such as its polishing of manners and its bringing of peace, she is severely critical of the consequences. I will not recite the popular debate about Burke’s effeminised monarchy which is rhetorically stamped with weakness. However, there arises a problem in her use of the term “natural.” Wollstonecraft approves the initiatives taken by French citizens to manage themselves, but, from the point of view of the “body-politic,” their self-management is considered as carried out from within. Furthermore, *A Historical and Moral View* is filled with allusions to the body-politic

that is diseased, and it would be paradoxical to say that the controlling citizens can be severed from this establishment.

But the people could no longer bear bleeding—for their veins were already so lacerated, it was difficult to find room to make a fresh incision; and the emollient prescriptions, the practice of former times, were now insufficient to stop the progress of a deadly disease (*FR* 43).

This seems to show the very condition of asthenic disease where the body is completely debilitated. “Bleeding,” or the practice of former times, is no longer effective to cure the disease. Wollstonecraft’s belief that civilization “weakened all the organs of the body-politic, and rendered man such a beast of prey” (*FR* 46) can only dissuade the reader that the people hold sufficient strength to revive the nation.

Somehow the newly emerging “public” or “the people,” which functions as “the hidden springs” or “secret mechanism” (*FR* 42), leads to recovery. With “the common instinct of corporate bodies,” this “herculean force of the whole empire was now clearing away every obstacle to freedom” (*FR* 43). The “spirit” of millions of men in France unanimously opposed the threats of despotism (*FR* 128). Frequently, in Wollstonecraft’s writings, the image of the body becomes so dominant that the word “mind” is metaphorically subsumed within the boundary of the material body, and, further, because the body extends to signify that of the collective body, “the mind” comes to denote the totality of the public mass:

When, therefore, the improvements of civil life consisted almost entirely in polishing the manners, and exercising the transient sympathies of the heart, it is clear, that this partial civilization must have worn itself out by destroying all energy of mind (*FR* 111).

Wollstonecraft sympathises with the republican ideal in the hope of recovering this energy. "Partial" civilization can refine manners at the expense of morals and the "natural" mind. She states, "their minds, in fact, instead of being cultivated, have been so warped by education, that it may require some ages to bring them back to nature" (*VRM* 18). Burke's utopia seems to Wollstonecraft far from being healthy, rather it is debilitated. For her, the hidden springs of people, or passions, are the true source of life.

The unanimity of the nation is stressed throughout the treatise, and the collectivity is expressed by the quickness of communication or "electrical sympathy." Obstacles did hamper the smooth path of the progress of the National Assembly, but such "conspiracies" or "corruption" of the old system only "proved a stimulus" rather than a hindrance (*FR* 128):

So rapid was the spirit, so general the momentum, that in the course of a week upwards of three millions of men in arms were formed into companies by a common interest resembling an electrical sympathy. Such was the quick succession of events—Such the unanimous sense of the nation; and such the formidable force which instantly opposed itself to the important threats of departing despotism. (*FR* 128)

One is here reminded of the sympathetic interaction of bodily organs elaborated by Robert Whytt. Xavier Bichat similarly propounds the importance of the "great sympathetic" (*PR* 272).²²⁶ Bichat stresses the plural form of the "nerves," for a series of communications within the body subsist between a great number of small *nervous systems*, all independent of each other, and all of which have ganglion as their centre"

²²⁶ Many of his democratic ideas are interestingly shared by Wollstonecraft in that they both believed that the notion of "sympathy" connoted the interaction between a great number of social groups / nervous systems as opposed to injunctions given by the head

(*PR*, 272, italics added). It is this metaphor of a vast array of nervous communications that lies beneath the revolution in the idea of the body-politic.

Likewise Wollstonecraft approves the fundamental principle of freedom, but her writing is constantly haunted by the “violence” and “fervour” of the “dreadful convulsion” (*FR* 43).²²⁷ The word “convulsion” is again a medical term, for it was a major symptom of nervous disease. It is crucial to note that by the time Wollstonecraft was working on the text in 1793, retrospectively writing about the Revolution in the late 1780s, her impressions had most likely been transformed by the political and moral consequences. Wollstonecraft’s analysis quite frequently resembles the Brunonian prescription especially with regard to passions:

Besides, the sudden emancipation of the people occasioned a delirium of joy, which required to be *managed* with the greatest delicacy. A vigorous ministry was certainly necessary to check the licentious spirit manifesting itself continually by acts of violence in so many parts of the kingdom, where tumults and assassinations were the effects of the giddiness of unexpected success.

(*FR* 133, italics added)

As if the entire kingdom was the body that functions with its logic, Wollstonecraft takes special precaution as to the management of the violence and passions that arise in various parts of the kingdom. She begins to wonder whether men are naturally good and civilization a product of improvement. The examples of the “unintelligent beings” whose imagination and passions are easily dominated by circumstantial elements illustrate this point. The minister’s “premature reforms” to urge the speedy destruction

of the state / brain.

²²⁷ In his *Memoir*, Godwin writes that Wollstonecraft “described to him . . . the anguish she felt at hearing of the death of Brissot, Bergniaud, and the twenty deputies, as one of

of obstinate prejudices, to “strike at the root of all their misery at once,” only caused further destruction of comfort and was pushed in opposition to the “theory of reason” (FR 45). The emphasis on the gradual improvement towards the “perfectibility” (FR 46) of human nature is Godwinian,²²⁸ but, as the chapters progress, numerous illustrations of “the foibles of the multitude” take the upperhand.

In the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft had clearly stated that “monsters” are those who have “tyrannized over thousands of their fellow-creatures” without sufficiently showing “discernment of human excellence” (VRW 105), dehumanising the monarch. However, this view shifts as the French Revolution leads to brutal consequences. The “inconstancy” of the general public (FR 133) is highlighted with their fluttering imagination:

Thus sentiments spouted from the lips come oftener from the head than the heart. Indeed natural sentiments are only the characters given by the imagination to recollected sensations; but the French, by the continual gratification of their senses, stifle the reveries of their imagination, which always requires to be acted upon by outward objects; and seldom reflecting on their feelings, their sensations are ever lively and transitory; exhaled / by every passing beam, and dissipated by the slightest storm. (FR 25)

The imagination of the Parisians, full of plots, “produced many false alarms,” and “inflamed the people,” but they proved to be “the idle rumours of fear” (FR 93). The “disturbed imagination” of the people was, therefore, filled with plots, and it even caused the people to make a false report about troops of banditti to the National

the most intolerable sensations she had ever experienced” (*Memoirs* 244).

²²⁸ According to Harriet Devine Jump, Wollstonecraft read Godwin’s *Political Justice* in early summer 1793. See Jump (1994), p.110.

Assembly; the disturbance in fact originally arose from a trivial quarrel (*FR* 129). Therefore, even in the provinces, “a number of idle rumours of present danger tended to make the country people [not only] eager to guard against they scarcely knew what” (*FR* 127). In Wollstonecraft’s sarcastic remarks about the violence and murder committed by the people, they are denominated “monsters”: “Strange, that a people, who often leave the theatre before the catastrophe, should have bred up such monsters!” (*FR* 125). The foible of the multitude is, thus, explicated as having the inclination to “run from one extreme to another, and that despair adopts the most violent measures” (*FR* 136). If Brown were to give a medical diagnosis, he would say that what is most needed is to take moderate measures.

One detrimental cause is located in the actions of the new government. Wollstonecraft laments that this dreadful convulsion which “shook the kingdom from one extremity to the other” could have been prevented if one of the ministers, Necker, had possessed “the eye of genius” (*ibid.*). The “feeble measures” of the minister and selfish views of the parliaments (*FR* 44) had precipitated the condition. Necker’s vanity and his popularity-seeking measures are contrasted with Mirabeau’s “earnestness” in argument; he always stood forth as the sturdy champion of reason (*FR* 124). Mirabeau²²⁹ who we may say is a capable physician of the body-politic, delivered a speech which was aided by the medical trope. Mirabeau’s address which was delivered to save the ruinous state of the finances in France is portrayed as a heroic one:

Our efforts to support the government are fruitless, a fatal numbness cramps all it’s powers. The public revenue is no more; and credit cannot gain strength at a moment, when our fears equal our hopes.—This spring of social power unbent,

²²⁹ Wollstonecraft admires Mirabeau as a genius (*FR* 174).

has weakened the whole machine; men and things, resolution, courage, and even virtue itself, have lost their tension. If your concurrence do not speedily restore life and motion to the body-politic, the grandest revolutions, perishing with the hopes it generated, will mingle again in the chaos (*FR* 175).

Again the body is compared to a “machine,” though this does not necessarily contradict the idea that the body-politic is like the physiological body.

Taking on this line of argument, Wollstonecraft’s anxiety about the loss of “tension” in the “spring” of the body-politic is expressed. She went as far as to take the side of Mirabeau in demanding an upper chamber so that it would function as a check. Unlike those “hot-headed men, who found it the shortest way to popularity, to deliver exaggerated eulogiums on liberty,” Mirabeau convinced Wollstonecraft that he supported the veto of the King in the interest of the people, though risking their favour (*FR* 158). This is perhaps what Wollstonecraft meant by “principle”: “men without principle rise like foam during a storm sparkling on the top of the billow, in which it [foam] is soon absorbed when the commotion dies away” (*FR* 47). Wollstonecraft’s philosophical problem was that there is no other “check” but “the veto of the king.” As some “judicious deputies” perceived that the minds of people not being completely ripe for a total change of government—from absolute despotism to complete republicanism Wollstonecraft hints at the necessity of maintaining “the shadow of monarchy” (*FR* 158). The fear was that, if the assembly allowed a “senate” to become a kind of “cradle of a

new aristocracy," the ancient hydra might "again rear it's head" (*FR* 163). In the end she assents to Mirabeau's policy that a second chamber or "senate" would not be under the influence of the same faction, consequently arriving at the suggestion that the "system of an old government is susceptible of improvement" (*FR* 165).

Inadvertently Wollstonecraft reverts back to Burkean conservatism for a different reason. She strongly believes that the Revolution is a necessary step to liberation from despotism, but regretfully concludes that the perfectible society is still in its "infancy." She hoped that the body-politic would be "managed" by the citizens of France themselves, but the "restless mob," the powerful symbol of "licentious freedom" (*FR* 210), are not yet capable of *self*-management:

Slaves and mobs have always indulged themselves in the same *excesses*, when once they broke loose from authority. The bent bow recoils with violence, when the hand is suddenly relaxed that forcibly held it; and sensibility, the plaything of outward circumstances, must be subjected to authority, or moderated by reason (*VRM* 181, 182).

Brunonian terminology is here incorporated. She is in favour of the interventionist view, and envisions that each citizen makes his or her own rational judgment while checking the "excesses" of their sensibility. Wollstonecraft however observes the failure of human agency. She believes that the "minds of young men generally have more fire, activity, and invention," but need to be balanced by another political influence represented by the age of thirty-five, or forty years (*FR* 165). The passions of youth are hence not to be trusted, a sentiment which was shared by Godwin. The National Assembly is to blame for not maintaining its "firmness of conduct," but Wollstonecraft

relapses into contradicting her first diagnosis that the body-politic, namely the corporate body, will be responsible for its own action. Indeed, she is now suggesting that the effective intervention of a third party is necessary to form a healthy body-politic. The picture of the mob that invaded the palace holds such a powerful image of incorrigible passions that she cannot but understand it as an expression of the self-indulgent sensibility of the population which needs curbing.

Wollstonecraft however accentuates the stubbornness, not the transient or mutable nature, of sensibility; thereby its movement will stay as the “memory” and “conscience,” like the “stains of deepest dye”:

It is morals, not feelings, which distinguish men from the beast of prey! These were transactions, over which, for the honour of human nature, it were to be wished oblivion could draw the winding-sheet, that has often enwrapped a heart, whose benevolence has been felt, but not known. But, if it be impossible to erase from the memory these foul deeds, which like the stains of deepest dye revived by remorse in the conscience, can never be rubbed out (*FR* 126).

This is a “physical sensibility” (*FR* 151) or a “bodily” register, “excited by a commotion of the animal spirits.” Hence it requires “a considerable length of time” to accustom men to change their habit. Provided that passions are an integral part of the body-politic, one can only expect a third party to check excess. Alternatively, the citizens would have to gradually improve themselves based on their unfaltering “conscience.”

Wollstonecraft’s approach in employing an extensive medical vocabulary enabled her to diagnose the “disease” which culminated in the French Revolution. It also helped her justify the “passions” for freedom and at the same time warn of the danger of its “violence” during the aftermath of the Revolution. Throughout the text of

A Historical and Moral View, her empiricist view is upheld by the trial and error approach of recommending the stimulation of passions, but, when it amounts to excess, she suggests the necessary “check.” Her allusion to the mistreatment of the new government suggests the necessity of supporting the infant society fully to achieve its perfect stage.

7

**Monster's Organic Body
in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein***

Enlightenment thinkers bent on demystification held that lack of reason bred monsters. Wollstonecraft, in remarking on the violence and murder committed by the people of France, denominated them “monsters” (FR 125). Although Mary Shelley’s passive position on politics seems out of place amongst other radical philosophers, the subject she takes up in her novel is one that was most popular amongst enlightenment thinkers, the notion of the Burkean awe for a patriarchal order. *Frankenstein*²³⁰ constantly presents tension between Victor and his father, and Victor and his creature (the monster), and perhaps this alone demonstrates Shelley’s interest in the contemporary political debate on the loci of patriarchal power. Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* (1791, 1792), which was “without doubt the single most successful response to Burke,”²³¹ addresses this issue with force and precision. Paine explicates Burke’s argument as absurd in that he asserts that a “certain body of men, who existed a hundred years ago, made a law; and that there does not now exist in the nation, nor ever will, nor ever can, a power to alter it” (*Rights of Man* 93):

The illuminating and divine principle of the equal rights of man, (for it has its

²³⁰ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (the 1818 text) ed. Marilyn Butler (Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 1993). Hereafter cited as *Frankenstein* with page numbers in parentheses. All citations are from this 1818 edition, because my aim is to examine the immediate impact of the medical writings which appeared at the turn of the century.

²³¹ Mark Philp. Introduction to Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man, Common Sense and*

origin from the Maker of man) relates, not only to the living individuals, but to generations of men succeeding each other. Every generation is equal in rights to the generations which preceded it, by the same rule that every individual is born equal in rights with his contemporary....[M]en are all of one degree, and consequently that all men are born equal, and with equal natural right, in the same manner as if posterity had been continued by creation instead of generation; the latter being only the mode by which the former is carried forward; and consequently, every child born into the world must be considered as deriving its existence from God. (*Rights of Man* 117)

“Creation” is here distinguished from “generation,” for that is what makes God special in a Christian community. Burke’s appraisal of the patriarchal order is evident in his defence of the parliamentary authority established in 1688. Paine accuses Burke of making it an “immortal power,” and justifying authority by perceiving it as “a sort of political Adam” who allegedly possesses a power to bind posterity forever (*Rights of Man* 94). Paine rejects this claim and calls it “monstrous” (*Rights of Man* 92), and inveighs against the artificiality of power.

Paine’s rejection of the “authority of the dead” is perhaps echoed in Shelley’s novel, in that Victor’s monstrous creation is similarly artificial, for nobody except God can re-create the dead. Some commentators have noted that the monster’s relationship with Victor is that of a rebellious son. The monster’s revenge is to ensure the end of the Frankenstein line by killing William and finally leading Victor to his death. This parricidal theme is hence often interpreted as an allegory of the French Revolution.²³²

Other Political Writings (Oxford:Oxford UP, 1998), p.xii.

²³² Lee Sterrenburg, ‘Mary Shelley’s Monster: Politics and Psyche in Frankenstein’ in *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley’s Novel* ed. George Levine and

Shelley's readiest source of political allusion is her mother's *A Historical and Moral View*, but it was hardly necessary for Shelley to learn the political argument from her mother's account, for the controversy over the French Revolution was the master theme of her epoch.

Few would fail to acknowledge the fact that Enlightenment philosophy occupies the central place in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but it is no easy task to isolate one definition that best exemplifies the essence of the novel, for the debate on the Revolution is as much a part of that philosophy as the science-oriented approach is. That is why I would like, in a highly selective manner, to draw attention to some of the relevant Enlightenment themes in this and the ensuing chapter. We tend to identify eighteenth-century faith in reason with the Enlightenment, but as Peter Gay has scrupulously rephrased it, "faith" should be designated by the more neutral term "confidence."²³³ The rational method, which is strictly scientific, is superior to other methods of gaining knowledge such as superstition, revelation, authority or tradition, because its affirmations were open to examination and refutation. If the Enlightenment thinkers were to use the term faith, it would contradict their own "faith."

So far, we have discussed Godwin and Wollstonecraft's belief in the rational soul, but confidence in its existence is hard to come by, when the specimen is not visually present. Instead, the body, in progressive enlightenment thought, became the object of the penetrating eyes of the philosophers as well as medical men in revealing human nature. The debate on rationalism involved the issues of the soul and body, and

U.C.Knoepfmacher (Berkeley and London: California UP, 1979), p.169. See also Chris Baldick's *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

²³³ Peter Gay, 'Becker's Heavenly City' in *Carl Becker's Heavenly Cited Revisted* ed. Raymond O. Rockwood (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1958), p.33.

consequently led to the question of the afterlife, which propelled not only scientific endeavour in searching for the cause of life but also religious and philosophical enquiry. Where does the “soul” come from, and where does it go after the dissolution of the body? Can the dead be restored to life? If so, what would be the consequence? Would there be a coherent self that represents the rational soul? I want to argue that the medical discourse in which both Shelley’s parents and herself had deep interest had an unfathomable impact on the way Shelley dealt with these philosophical questions. Her primary source of inspiration, she writes, came from “various philosophical doctrines” discussed by Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, amongst which the nature of “the principle of life” and the possibility of its being discovered and communicated were the main subjects.²³⁴ Various philosophical doctrines most likely involved scientific, physiological, and theological issues which I have already touched upon, and these are the areas irrevocably bound together in thinking about life.

We must however remember that much of physiological theory in the eighteenth century was predicated upon earlier mechanical philosophy.²³⁵ The mechanical thinking which had been useful in medical theory became a threat in religious traditions with their fundamental beliefs. The development in chemical science furthered this movement. The mechanical and chemical sciences both increased doubt about the existence of an “immaterial” agent. This new idea caused frictions between

²³⁴ See Author’s introduction in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein Or The Modern Prometheus*. (1831) ed. Maurice Hindle (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992), p.8.

²³⁵ In the earlier century, Descartes attempted to explain embryological development by mechanical causation based on matter and motion alone, which was adopted by Nicolas Malebranche to observe the construction of organic bodies, while insisting that the mechanical cause alone could not account for reproduction. If matter could form organized beings, living creatures, a theological problem of what role was left for the Divine Creator remained. See Shirley A. Roe’s *Matter, Life, and Generation: Eighteenth-Century Embryology and the Haller-Wolff debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), p.8.

materialism that attributed motion and life energy to matter itself, and the dualist position that separated the material and immaterial realms.²³⁶ How can an immaterial agency be scrutinized if it is “invisible”? What role does mechanism have in explaining biological operation? What is the relationship of God to his Creation? It is impossible for me to contextualise this discourse without referring to Joseph Priestley’s philosophy, for this is undoubtedly the centrepiece of the new radicalism in thinking about the relation between matter and spirit. Even more important is Erasmus Darwin, who shared a similar interest with Priestley and was well versed in scientific and medical literature. Darwin and William Lawrence are two major influences discernable from Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Lawrence’s lecture “On Life” is said to have focused on the issue of physiology and anatomy “in the spirit and avant-garde medical terminology of M.F.Xavier Bichat, a French physiologist.”²³⁷ We can only speculate whether the Shelleys had read or were familiar with Bichat’s works, but since Lawrence’s work presents many textual echoes of his organic theory, it is worth citing Bichat’s works. It is my aim in this chapter to clarify Mary Shelley’s application of these authors’ ideas and how they took shape in *Frankenstein* within an Enlightenment context.

²³⁶ One of the most popular theorists was David Hartley, but there were other physiologists who made use of Newton’s aetherial theory. See, for example, Browne Langrish’s *Essay on Muscular Motions* (London, 1733). His mechanical approach to physiology follows the contemporary trend of reviving aetherial ideas, with the presumed relationship to fire, light, and electricity. See also James Parsons’s *Philosophical Observations on the Analogy between the Propagation of Animals and Vegetables* (London: C.Davis, 1752). He rejects mechanism as a solution to biological problems.

²³⁷ Bichat’s physiological theory is mentioned in relation to Shelley’s historical context by Marilyn Butler. See Introduction to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The 1818 Text. (1969), pp.xix, xxxix.

1. Secret Unveiled

Not only did Enlightenment thought encourage the immense progress of science, but it also redirected the form of knowledge towards that which can be openly viewed. As David Knight's study reveals, it was, therefore, an exciting period for scientific experimentation and discovery to be explained to a wider public:

Lectures in London, Glasgow, and Paris attracted enormous audiences to their orations and demonstration experiments. The chemical philosopher was expected to develop and discuss a world-view; his science seemed the key to the nature of matter, and he was in a position to throw light upon such questions as the truth of materialism or the role of mechanistic explanations in psychology and biology.²³⁸

In the early nineteenth century, major scientists and physiologists such as Humphry Davy, Giovanni Aldini and Andrew Ure had given lectures or performed experiments. There is no proof that Mary Shelley attended any of these dazzling demonstrations in London, but we cannot deny that the advance in science especially in the field of life science was witnessed by a large number of people or read about in magazines. Erasmus Darwin's experiments on life, though carried out in an earlier period, are mentioned in Mary Shelley's Introduction to the 1831 text:

They [Lord Byron and Shelley] talked of experiments of Dr Darwin (I speak not of what the Doctor really did, or said that he did, but, as more to my purpose, of what was then spoken of as having been done by him), who preserved a piece of vermicelli²³⁹ in a glass case, till by some extraordinary

²³⁸ David M. Knight, *Natural Science Books in English 1600-1900*. (London, 1972), p.128.

²³⁹ In *The Temple of Nature*, Darwin describes *vorticellae*, microscopic animals which

means it began to move with voluntary motion.²⁴⁰ Not thus, after all, would life be given. Perhaps a corpse would be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth. (*Frankenstein* 1831, 8)

Already in the eighteenth century this kind of experiment was referred to even in politico-theological writings, such as Paine's *The Age of Reason* (1794). Paine is however mindfully sober about these experiments, and leaves the "unknown" cause to God. Because many scientific experiments at the turn of the century successfully proved things that would have been impossible in previous times, "extracting flames or sparks of fire from the human body" or "restoring persons to life who are to appearance dead" were no longer "miracles" (*AR* 64). This statement is strongly echoed by Victor Frankenstein's mentor, M. Waldman: "They [the modern masters], whose hands seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pore over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles" (*Frankenstein* 30).

David Hume has defined "miracle" as a violation of the laws of nature.²⁴¹ Likewise, Paine believes that scientific experiments cannot go beyond the operation of certain laws which he calls "nature." For example, one can restore persons to life only when "animation is not extinct." What Victor does is to go further. Erasmus Darwin's

after being dried up for several months, leaving them apparently dead, can be revived by putting them in water. It is possible that Percy mentioned *vorticellae* and Mary misheard it as *vermicelli*, or Percy himself could have been mistaken.

²⁴⁰ Darwin has touched upon some experiments of making a paste of flour and water, which "has been suffered to become acescent, the animalcules called eels." These "animalcules" which are at first as minute as other microscopic animalcules, become large animals by frequent reproduction.

²⁴¹ David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals* (1777) Revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Open University Press, 1975), p.115.

suggestion that “even the organic particles of dead animals may, when exposed to a due degree of warmth and moisture, regain some degree of vitality” (*TN* Additional Notes 7) does foreshadow a form of intervention by human science, which is typified by Victor’s experiment. Darwin’s *The Temple of Nature* may have served as a catalyst to culturally connect Mother Nature, as that which represents the workings of nature from the formation of the earth, to the evolution of life. In his Preface, he states his intention of “bringing distinctly to the imagination the beautiful and sublime images of the operations of Nature...” (*TN* Preface). Thus with reverential phrases did Darwin build a “gorgeous temple” of “majestic Nature.” Nature here is personified by Urania who hides behind the “mystic veil” (*TN* Canto I, pp.14,15, ll.163-168). Here one is instantly reminded of M.Waldman’s phraseology, that modern masters “penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew [sic] how she works in her hiding places” (*Frankenstein* 30). Paine does not accept, what most Enlightenment thinkers may have dreamed; the animation of a person who is really dead. He thinks we are better off than if we had been let into the “secret”: “that part of the operation that we do not know, and which, if we did, we could not perform, the Creator takes upon himself and performs it for us” (*AR* 61).

The passage where the Enlightenment theme is most acutely expressed in the novel is when Victor states, “Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world” (*Frankenstein* 36). For Darwin, it is the “chemic changes” that have the power to breach the barrier between the condition of living and that of death: “Organic forms with chemic changes strive, /Live but to die, and die but to reivive!” (*TN* Canto II, p.46, ll.41, 42) The line that separates life and death was also a vital issue for Xavier Bichat. In his

Physiological Researches Upon Life and Death (1809), to reveal the workings of “vital laws” Bichat suggests questioning what “that intermediate state between health and death” is: “all the functions experience so remarkable a change, a change, which, infinitely varied, produces such innumerable varieties of disease.” (*PR* 136). This approach is also taken by Victor: “To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death” (*Frankenstein* 33). While Bichat’s Enlightenment rhetoric prefigures Victor’s scientific ambition, Bichat is as circumspect as Paine with regard to how he perceives the “limit”:

What physician is there who can, according to the actual data of his art, pierce the thick veil which here hides from his view the operations of nature? What judgment is there that would dare on this head to go beyond the limits of strict observation? (*PR* 136)

Bichat is less optimistic about discovering how nature operates, but this passage throws a light on the rhetorical aspect of the “veil.” The term becomes even more equivocal when accompanied with an adjective “thick,” for it can mean the metaphysical veil that limits our knowledge about life, and also the physical layers of the body, including the skin that hides the minute operations inside the body.

In scientific and medical discourses, truth or knowledge was often personified as “she” or “nature,” into which the scientific gaze penetrates. Victor in retrospect calls the working of nature “so astonishing a secret” (*Frankenstein* 34) or the “tremendous secret” (*Frankenstein* 36) of the human frame. While unveiling a secret had a positive value because it solved a “mystery” (*Frankenstein* 33) in the Enlightenment context, secrecy was associated with something inaccessible, dangerous and quite frequently sexual. Darwin’s depiction of Nature is more sexual than perilous, attributing to Nature

the erotic feminine traits such as “breasts” and “her fine waist.” What Darwin describes is Nature’s “Beauty” with her “stately limbs” and “goddess-form” (*TN* Canto I, pp.12,13, ll.129-144). Like Bichat’s “veil” Victor’s rhetoric works on both levels, metaphysical and physical. Therefore, it is natural for him to pay attention to the image of “beauty” in selecting the parts of his creature, although the outcome betrays his heightened expectation.

As Iwan Phys Morus’s extensive study of nineteenth-century experiments has clearly shown, the philosophy of each scientific experimenter was different and his social role equivocal.²⁴² Since the practice of experimental science during this period was not a straightforward enterprise with clear-cut boundaries and protocols, scientists had to approach the philosophy of “life” with their own assumptions as to whether it is an integral part of the material universe, or an immaterial spirit infused in the body. Unlike many materialists, Paine is outspoken about human ignorance concerning the “invisible” agency that gives us life and sustains it.

The man who proportions the several parts of a mill, uses the same scientific principles as if he had the power of constructing a universe; but as he cannot give to matter that *invisible agency* by which all the component parts of the immense machine of the universe have influence upon each other, and act in motional unison together, without any apparent contact, and to which man has given the name of attraction, gravitation, and repulsion, he supplies the place of that agency by the humble imitation of teeth and cogs. (*AR* 40, Italics added)

He doubts that man is capable of applying mechanical theory to gain knowledge about

²⁴² Iwan Rhys Morus, *Frankenstein’s Children: Electricity, Exhibition, and Experiment in Early-Nineteenth-Century London* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998), p.4.

that invisible agency which would enable a man to create life. It is crucial to define the line, as Paine did, between the facts that were scientifically solid and what was merely hopeful at the time, for only that will allow us accurately to analyse Shelley's interests in thematising animation, but the fact that this line was already blurred makes her theme even more controversial. In order to analyse Shelley's scientific interests, the first step which I should take is to describe the scientific and medical education that Victor obtains, thereby finding clues about the symbolic aspect of the outcome of his experiment.

If . . . my father had taken the pains to explain to me, that the principles of Agrippa had been entirely exploded, and that a modern system of science had been introduced, which possessed much greater powers than the ancient, because the powers of the latter were chimerical, while those of the former were real and practical; under such circumstances, I should certainly have thrown Agrippa aside, and, with my imagination warmed as it was, should probably have applied myself to the more rational theory of chemistry which has resulted from modern discoveries. (*Frankenstein* 23)

In the novel, Victor Frankenstein, rather than directing his attention to "modern" science, initially takes interest in the "ancient" system of science when he accidentally finds a volume of works written by Cornelius Agrippa. Victor's enthusiasm about the ancient authors' search for the "philosopher's stone" is at this time deeply implanted in his curiosity, which persists even after he cultivates his understanding of modern science. The turning point for his self-education takes place when he encounters the spectacular phenomenon of "thunder and lightening." "Electricity" (*Frankenstein* 24) opens up his eyes to a more "real and practical" or "modern" science (*Frankenstein* 23). This perhaps

refers to the experiments carried out by Darwin and his friend Benjamin Franklin.

At his university of Ingolstadt, despite M.Krempe's advice to relinquish the study of the ancient authors, he still had "a contempt for the uses of modern natural philosophy" (*Frankenstein* 29). It was his mentor, M.Waldman, who led Victor to see the virtues in both kinds of science, ancient and modern. Victor learns that modern natural philosophers have "ascend[ed] into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe" and "even mock the invisible world with its own shadows" (*Frankenstein* 31). Through his instruction, Victor is introduced into the world of chemistry which was still an alien concept to him. M. Waldman celebrates chemistry as "that branch of natural philosophy in which the greatest improvements have been and may be made" (*Frankenstein* 31). Except for the mention of "chemistry," Shelley is not articulate about what constitutes the "modern" system of science that makes it possible for Victor finally to unveil the "secret" of life.

William Cullen celebrates the "new modes of philosophizing," signifying the new mathematical or mechanical ways of drawing conclusions about the human body (*FL* ix-xi). Like Cheyne, he acknowledges the "immaterial power" which is "connected with our organized or material part," but leaves out discussion of it as irrelevant. What Cheyne had called the "sentient principle" is dismissed altogether from the scene.

. . . for if contraction or irritation necessarily follows perception, and perception is an equally necessary consequence of impression, we have no more occasion to take notice of a *sentient principle* in a system of physic, than if it was a mechanical cause; so we shall enquire no further into the one or the other (*CL* 12).

"Mechanical philosophy" and "Chemical Pathology," he maintains, promised a much

better explanation than ancient philosophy, which came to “prevail very much till the end of the late century; and has indeed continued to have a great share in our systems down to the present time” (*FL* ix-xi). Cullen’s realistic treatment of the “sentient principle” is described as a chief characteristic of modern science in the novel. While “[t]he ancient teachers of this science,” said M. Waldman, “promised impossibilities, and performed nothing . . . [t]he modern masters promise very little” (*Frankenstein* 30).

One of the most well known contemporaries of Mary Shelley was no doubt Humphry Davy. His chemical science attempted to reveal the “profound secrets” of both nature and man. He insisted that chemical processes not only explain the workings of natural phenomena but are actually required for the nourishment and growth of “organized beings”.²⁴³

the phenomena of combustion, of the solution of different substances in water, of the agencies of fire; the production of rain, hail, and snow, and the conversion of dead matter into living matter by vegetable organs, all belong to chemistry. (*Discourse* 5, 6)

It is not my intention to question the importance of Davy’s chemical studies nor the benefit Shelley may have gained from his theory, but to illustrate the genealogy of chemical science and how Shelley’s materialism is linked to the earlier ideas. “Secrets” in chemical phenomena were explored by a number of eighteenth-century scholars who were already familiar with what they called “chemical affinities” (*Zoonomia* i 499) within an organic entity. Davy’s enthusiasm about ‘Romantic Science’²⁴⁴ is certainly

²⁴³ Sir Humphry Davy, *A Discourse, Introductory to a Course of Lectures on Chemistry* (London: J. Johnson, 1802), p.8. Hereafter cited as *Discourse* with page numbers in parentheses.

²⁴⁴ Maurice Hindle, *Mary Shelley: Frankenstein* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994), p.35.

observable from Victor's initial statement at Ingolstadt: "natural philosophy, and particularly *chemistry* in the most comprehensive sense of the term, became nearly my sole occupation" (*Frankenstein* 30, italics added). Yet Davy's chemical science is not so useful in understanding the nineteenth-century scientific context, as illustrating the whole trajectory of eighteenth-century physiology, which sought to pin down the nature of matter by using "analogy." For these physiologists the use of analogy was more rhetorical than scientific, for chemical reactions could not have been "visible" even with the best microscopes.

2. The Paradox of the Laws of Nature

In a sense chemistry, which straddles physical (mechanical) and life sciences, became a useful tool in understanding the operation of the body by means of analogy. The scientific methodology adopted by Erasmus Darwin was largely predicated upon "analogy." "The great CREATOR of all things," he argues, "has infinitely diversified the works of his hands," but he is certain that God "has at the same time stamped a certain similitude on the features of nature" (*Zoonomia* i 1). This is why he believes that finding the "similitude" or making "rational analogy" leads to "many and important discoveries."

He supported his scientific argument by comparing two or more natural phenomena with chemical experiments. He compares, for instance, electric fluid with heat: "The analogy between the phenomena of the electric fluid and of heat furnishes another argument in support of the existence of heat as a gravitating fluid." To illustrate the power of analogy, he explicates similarities, such as the means of accumulation (by friction on the excited body), the conducting tools of propagation (metals), or their

capacity to be “electrized” if they are mechanically extended.²⁴⁵ Darwin elevates this analogy to explain the immaterial agent through the powers of heat, electricity or gravitation:

Some philosophers have divided all created beings into material and immaterial: the former including all that part of being, which obeys the mechanic laws of action and reaction, but which can begin no motion of itself; the other is the cause of all motion, and is either termed the power of gravity, or of specific attraction, or the spirit of animation. This immaterial agent is supposed to exist in or with matter, but to be quite distinct from it, and to be equally capable of existence, after the matter, which now possesses it, is decomposed.

Nor is this theory ill supported by *analogy*, since heat, electricity, and magnetism, can be given to or taken from a piece of iron; and must therefore exist, whether separated from the metal, or combined with it. From a parity of reasoning, the spirit of animation would appear to be capable of existing as well separately from the body as with it. (*Zoonomia* i 109)

By comparing the immaterial agent to “heat, electricity and magnetism,” Darwin is making the material/immaterial controversy redundant. Analogy means that he will not “dispute about words.” To him, the power of electricity is synonymous with that of gravity, specific attraction, magnetism, and “even the spirit of animation.” By so doing, he evades the religious question altogether. It was in all probability this style that Paine had critiqued. Paine rejected the idea that “man has given the name of attraction,

²⁴⁵ Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden. Part I. The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) (London: Scolar Press, 1973), Additional Notes pp.15, 16.

gravitation, and repulsion” to an immaterial agent. It is of great interest to me to study the language, for it is precisely this kind of analogy, or transgression, that incited the image of the human body, particularly the dead body, as a mere material object into which the spirit or soul could be infused or from which it could be taken out.

Yet what is fundamentally innovative about Darwin’s medical theory is not the method of analogy, but his organic theory which revolutionised the whole concept of the body as a machine. Despite much reliance on “analogy” in providing rational confidence, Darwin disregards medical theorists who “idly ingenious, busied themselves in attempting to explain the laws of life by those of mechanism and chemistry” instead of “comparing the properties belonging to animated nature with each other” (*Zoonomia* i 1). Priestley’s downright materialism runs deep in Darwin’s theory, in that the latter identifies the spirit of animation²⁴⁶ with “matter of a finer kind” (*Zoonomia* i 109), but Darwin was not a simple scientist. He believes identity exists in “every fibre of the corporeal part of our system” (*Zoonomia* i 133), and, unlike in Priestley, mechanistic allusions are minimal in his medical treatise. The mind is no longer the workings of immaterial spirits, for animal spirits have become part of the corporeal system: ‘Some philosopher, I believe it is Des Cartes, has said, “I think, therefore, I exist.” But this is not right reasoning, because thinking is a mode of existence; and it is thence only saying, “I exist, therefore I exist”’ (ibid.). What makes Darwin’s theory distinctive is therefore his career as a physician and his medical knowledge. Living beings are those entities which do not react solely in a mechanical

²⁴⁶ By the words spirit of animation or sensorial power, he means “only that animal life, which mankind possesses in common with brutes, and in some degree even with vegetables,” and, just as Cullen had done, leaves “the consideration of the immortal part of us, which is the object of religion, to those who treat of revelation” (ibid.).

manner to environmental inputs, but *possesses an inherent responsiveness of their own* (*Zoonomia* ii 148, Italics added).

Chemistry as the principal branch of science is emphasized in *Frankenstein*, but only as that which paves the way to understanding “physiology.”

One of the phaenomena [sic] which had peculiarly attracted my attention was the structure of the human frame, and, indeed, any animal endued with life. Whence, I often asked myself, did *the principle of life* proceed? It was a bold question, and one which has ever been considered as a mystery; yet with how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our inquiries. I revolved these circumstances in my mind, and determined thenceforth to apply myself more particularly to those branches of natural philosophy which relate to *physiology*. (*Frankenstein* 33, Italics added)

This passage is profoundly meaningful in terms of its cultural context, for it could be historically interpreted as the move away from the mechanical to the organic operation of the body, such as was effected by the vitalist approach of John Brown and the organic theory of Erasmus Darwin, Xavier Bichat and William Lawrence. There is clearly a shift in what gives rise to bodily sensations or feelings: from the external conditions to the “organs of sense” themselves.

The implication is that the workings of the physiological body are not as predictable and mechanistic as the earlier natural philosophers had anticipated. Instead these physiologists explicitly refer to the physiological power as the “power of contraction” and not that of “attraction”:

The fibres, which constitute the muscles and organs of sense, possess a power

of contraction. The circumstances attending the exertion of this power of CONTRACTION constitute the laws of animal motion, as the circumstances attending the exertion of the power of ATTRACTION constitute the laws of motion of inanimate matter. (*Zoonomia* i 30)

Darwin replaces mechanical jargon with physiological terms that explicate the movement of the organic parts. William Lawrence follows Bichat in that he characterises the essential quality of “living beings” as having “organic textures” which produce phenomena such as sensation and contraction, and their operation is constantly modified by “the vital powers” (*Lectures* 71). Life, he argues, presupposes organisation not merely in the external arrangement of the whole, but in each part, and in all the details of each. In short, he concludes, “life is the result of the mutual actions and reactions of all parts” (*Lectures* 93). The ultimate paradox is that the more one gains knowledge about the “secret” of nature, gradually understanding the intricacy of the make-up of the body, the more he or she is made aware of the uncontrollable quality of the body, which ironically diminishes the “confidence” which Enlightenment thinkers looked forward to securing.

We have so far examined the complex ideas which evolved in medical discourse between the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Darwin’s materialism is ambiguous in that he grants power to matter itself, while analogising the power (the spirit of animation) to heat and electricity. Victor’s materialism is not entirely straightforward either. On the one hand, he calls the corpses he collected “materials” (*Frankenstein* 35, 36) to prepare the “frame” for the “reception” of animation (*Frankenstein* 35), implying the passivity of the matter. He even calls it the “lifeless thing” (*Frankenstein* 38). Nevertheless his hypothesis is undeniably based on the

assumption that corpses can be reanimated, because the power of contractibility belongs to each organ, or else, he would not have designed the intricate construction of the body.

Bichat's hypothesis perhaps comes closest to Victor's experiment, and it almost prefigures the monstrous creation. He conceives an imaginary experiment to prove that what sustains life is not just the contractibility in the muscles but "the cause which creates its exercise" meaning "the cerebral action."

If it were possible to compose a man, partly with the organs of the senses and the brain of an old man, and partly with the muscles of a youth, the voluntary motions of such a man would be scarcely more developed, because it does not suffice that a muscle can contract itself, it is necessary its *power* of doing so should be put in action; now what cause is there to produce the action in this instance? (*PR* 129)

This is at the same time suggesting that if the organs of senses are not worn out as in an old man, the experiment may be a realistic one. What I believe deserves a closer attention is not the suggestion of a monstrous creation, but his indifference to building one coherent identity or self: he does not prioritise either the organs of sense or the muscles. Both are equally necessary for the continuation of life. For Bichat, the existence of the rational mind or soul is not an issue any more than whether the creator of man is God. Where physiology is concerned, the matter, or organs themselves, are what keep the vital powers in motion, and not the immaterial spirit that regulates and monitors the body.

Interestingly, one of the most difficult tasks for Victor is to re-create the physiological body with "all its intricacies of fibres, muscles, and veins" (*Frankenstein* 35), reflecting the Darwinian scheme that does not allow a machine to be reanimated.

The focus is here on the fibrous body, and not the soul. He could have attempted the creation of a being like himself or one of simpler organization, but, unsatisfied with the materials within his command, Victor again collects bones from charnel houses (*Frankenstein* 36), and patches up these materials. The minuteness of the work involved is implied by Victor's change of plans in his creature's size: "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" (*Frankenstein* 35, 36). This is a realistic picture considering the medical knowledge of the time. What differentiates the vitalist theory of Darwin, Bichat and Lawrence from Priestley's mechanical theory is their determination to uphold the complex and changing nature of "physiology." Bichat argues that the animal body is necessarily an "organized" being whose

proper life of each organ is composed of the different modifications that vital sensibility and mobility undergo in each, modifications which depend inevitably on circulation and the temperature of the organ. Each one in their several sensibility, mobility, temperature, and circulation has a particular mode of feeling, and of moving, a heat independent of that of the body, and a capillary circulation which, subtracted from the empire of the heart, only receives the influence of the tonic action of the part. But let us pass over this point of physiology, which has been so often and so learnedly discussed by other authors. (*PR* 92)

William Lawrence similarly considers it important to differentiate the workings of physiology from other scientific operations. He follows Bichat in asserting that the component particles are "continually changing" through "absorption, assimilation, exhalation, generation, and growth" (*Lectures* 94). The essential element of the natural

laws, Lawrence argues, is “by its very nature, fluctuating and indeterminate.” It is therefore ironic that “laws” which should give a regulatory explanation about life can only show its “uncertainty” (*Lectures* 71). Above all “uncertainty” and change are the key concepts in capturing the mind of organic theorists who cast piercing eyes on nature’s secret movement. Even after death, matter survives in different shapes: “Immortal matter braves the transient storm, /Mounts from the wreck, unchanging but in form.—” (*TN* Canto II, p.46, ll.43, 44). Darwin describes this as “the perpetual *mutability* of the forms of matter” referring to the system of transmigration introduced by Pythagoras.²⁴⁷ It is the mutability of an organism that makes it inherently unpredictable. Victor’s experiment proved that he was successful in literally “unveiling” the operation of nature, however what he has created is an organic being that symbolises uncertainty. The grotesque object previously hidden is at last exposed. Victor perceives the creature as not only “ugly,” but, “when those muscles and joints [of the monster] were rendered capable of motion, [that] became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived” (*Frankenstein* 40). What is most horrific therefore is not the ugliness itself, but the voluntary movement of these “muscles and joints” that were originally “inanimate.” In other words, Victor fears the “spontaneous” and “uncontrollable” nature of the creature, less than its appearance.

Frankenstein is not just about a scientific failure that accidentally creates a monster. The novel presents the idealism of a medical student, followed by his great disappointment. Darwin had recourse to Newtonian confidence that certain movements or phenomena are based on a regulatory pattern of the “laws of nature” (analogy), but at the same time avowed the changeful nature of an organic being. There is clearly a

²⁴⁷ *ibid.* Italics added.

paradox between having confidence in the analytical method of observing similar “features of nature” which are everywhere stamped, and denying the existence of such laws because of the fluctuating nature of organic matter. Furthermore, the beautiful Temple of Nature which Victor had so ardently sought was nowhere to be found.

3. Ethereal Fires

Bichat had followed the Brunonian idea that there was a “sum” of excitability or vital energy in a life time: “These two orders (animal and organic) may be compared to two lights burning at the same time, and which have only a certain quantity of matter to feed them” (*PR* 131). In other words, if so-called “Life” or “excitability” is not used up or “expended” by the fire, one may survive the toughest condition, if only life or the “spirit” does not escape. Mary Shelley employs Brunonian ideas in her short story, ‘Roger Dodsworth: the Reanimated Englishman.’ It is about a man who was supposedly preserved in suspended animation after the 1654 avalanche, and was allegedly reanimated in Shelley’s time. The fact that she took this story from a newspaper report of 1826 clearly shows her philosophical engagement with the question of life, and her scrupulous description using physiological ideas is worth citing in full.

Animation (I believe physiologists agree) can as easily be suspended for an hundred or two years, as for as many seconds. A body hermetically sealed up by the frost, is of necessity preserved in its pristine entireness. That which is totally secluded from the action of external agency, can neither have any thing added to nor taken away from it: no decay can take place, for something can never become nothing; under the influence of that *state of being which we call death*, change but not annihilation removes from our sight the corporeal atoma;

the earth receives sustenance from them, the air is fed by them, each element takes its own, thus seizing forcible repayment of what it had lent.²⁴⁸

In this frame of reference, Darwin's notion of Galvanic electricity as a stimulus in reviving a dead body could be more easily comprehended.

"Galvanism's method" generally meant that "the muscles and the nerves were the source of electric action" whilst "Volta's artifice," meant that "the dissimilar metals [Voltanic pile] constituted the electric source."²⁴⁹ Darwin seems at first sceptical of Galvanic "animal electricity," and rejects the "similitude between the spirit of animation, which contracts the muscular fibres, and the electric fluid" (*Zoonomia* i 66), and is unwilling to accept the notion that the experiments with electricity do not supply us with a "new quantity of the spirit of life" (ibid). He did not therefore entirely believe in his own theory of analogy. However, in the case of the paralytic patient, for example, Darwin believed "repeated and strong shocks of electricity to have been of great advantage" (*Zoonomia* i 39), remarking positively on the therapeutic effects. He is even hopeful about its function as "vital ether."

If nevertheless this theory [that electricity shocks produce an additional quantity of the spirit of life] should ever become established, a stimulus must be called an eductor of vital ether . . . and by drawing off the charges of vital fluid may occasion the contraction or motions of the muscular fibres, and organs of sense. (ibid.)

He cautiously evades a definite conclusion, but, considering that he had employed the

²⁴⁸ Mary Shelley, 'Roger Dodsworth: The Reanimated Englishman' (1826) in *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories* ed. Charles E. Robinson. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.44. Italics added.

²⁴⁹ William Sturgeon, *A Course of Twelve Elementary Lectures on Galvanism* (London, 1843), p.18.

means of electricity to treat his own patients, it is probable that he had hoped for the therapeutic effect of electricity or even animation. The fundamental difference between Voltaic electricity and Galvanic (animal) electricity, therefore, closely parallels the mechanistic and organic systems of the body. The former requires constant exertion on the part of an external agent whether it be "Voltaic electricity," immaterial spirit or "God," while the latter does not require such an agent once it is put in motion, for matter has its "ethereal fires" or its own power of "contractibility" and "sensibility." This dispute reminds us of the Hunter-Lawrence controversy. While John Hunter, a vehement anti-materialist, invokes the immaterial "living principle" to explain nearly all animal and vegetable physiological phenomena, William Lawrence assigns them to the organic nature of the body. When we consider the Volta-Galvani debate with this in mind, we are made to see a certain correspondence, the question of whether the active agent is an integral part of the body or not. Darwin's influence on Shelley's imagination is evident in their shared interests in the possibility of resuscitating a dead organic being, and also their belief in the vital quality of matter.

The monster is a collection of inanimate bodies, but when Victor infuses a "spark" of being into this lifeless thing, it "breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (*Frankenstein* 38, 9). Like Darwin, Humphry Davy had touched upon the electrical device which stimulates the "organs of sensation." He gave a series of lectures in 1812, and the *Monthly Magazine* describes his experiment as follows:

The identity of Voltaic and common electricity is demonstrated by the spark, employed for exhibiting electrical phenomena, as electrometers, the electrical battery, and on the *organs of sensation*. When bodies are similarly electrified by Voltaic as by common electricity, they repel each other; but when

dissimilarly, they attract each other. The electrical battery was charged, and produced a spark by a single contact from the Voltaic instrument.²⁵⁰

Many intellectuals who put on performances were interested in demonstrating the responsiveness of the body or the “organs of sensation” by means of electricity.²⁵¹ When Giovanni Aldini, Galvani’s nephew, visited London and performed before the Royal Society, he utilized the heads of freshly slaughtered Oxen and dissected frogs to produce the galvanic fluid. Galvanism, according to Iwan Rhys Morus, is a way of representing the human body as a machine which operates with the force of electricity.²⁵² This is perhaps true if the force of electricity is capable of controlling the mechanised body. However, Galvanism gives us a valuable insight into the organic body that has its own life energy. Once the electrical stimulus is exerted, the body takes on its control over “sensation” and “feelings.” This is precisely what the monster stands for.

The term “monster” was often employed to signify an uneducated and often violent mob. Shelley’s representation of the mob in ‘The Swiss Peasant’ closely mirrors Wollstonecraft’s in *A Historical and Moral View*. The heroine of the story, Fanny, is caught in between her lover Louis Chaumont whose family had been oppressed and reduced to poverty, and Henry Marville, the son of her benefactress. In the midst of political turmoil, between the peasants and the aristocrats, Fanny and the Marvilles encounter Louis with his peasant band who are “violent in gesture and menace.” What Madame de Marville says to the mob excites them:

The word was electric. The fierce passions of the *mob*, excited by the mischief

²⁵⁰ *The Monthly Magazine: or British Register* Vol. XXXIII (London, 1812), p.262.

²⁵¹ In the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein* there is a passage explicitly referring to electricity as a ‘fluid’ and this suggests that the protagonist’s understanding of the universe relates to the life-energy that shares the same immaterial substance with electricity.

they were about to perpetrate, now burst like a stream into this new channel. With violent execrations they rushed upon the unfortunate woman: they would have torn her from the car, but already her son had sprung from his hiding-place, and striking a violent blow at the foremost assailant, checked for a moment their brutal outrages.²⁵³

Louis, having heard that Fanny is now the wife of Henry, tries to pacify the mob. "Yet, it was no easy task, even for him, to stem the awakened passions of the blood-thirsty mob." To "control the violence to which he had given rise seemed impossible." The metaphor of "electricity" is again crucial, especially in depicting the uncontrollable nature of the mob, as if it were an animated monster.

Mrs. Gaskell's misreading of Mary Shelley's monster in *Mary Barton* (1848) has caught the attention of some commentators, for she not only misnamed the monster in the novel *Frankenstein*, but called him a soulless and inarticulate being.

No education had given him wisdom; and without wisdom, even love, with all its effects, too often works but harm. . . The actions of the uneducated seem to be typified in those of Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities, ungifted with a soul, a knowledge of the difference between good and evil.²⁵⁴

Chris Baldick argues that this is Mrs Gaskell's "creative misreading" of the stage adaptation by Richard Brinsley Peake,²⁵⁵ because Shelley's original *Frankenstein* gives

²⁵² Iwan Rhys Morus (1998), pp.130, 131.

²⁵³ Mary Shelley, 'The Swiss Peasant' in *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories* ed. Charles E. Robinson (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.148.

²⁵⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), p.170. Confounding the name of the scientist with the monster is a common error made even today.

²⁵⁵ Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.87.

an entirely different depiction of the monster, who is neither inarticulate nor soulless. Conversely, what this “misreading” does show is that an educated mind and the judgment of moral standards were perceived to be the primary qualifications of the “soul” in the early nineteenth century. In this sense, the monster in the novel undeniably possesses a soul, for not only does the monster acknowledge the distinction between good and evil, he is a rational creature, or perhaps too rational, justifying his own immoral conduct with impressive eloquence. The monster is not evil, nor is he uneducated. He is, like Wollstonecraft’s heroine, Mary, self-educated.

His passion is described as both “uncontrollable” (*Frankenstein* 187) and “insatiable” (*Frankenstein* 188). However, he repents his conduct after his creator’s death: “I, who irretrievably destroyed thee by destroying all thou lovedst” (*Frankenstein* 187). Although the monster is given the denomination of “a rational creature” by Victor, the monster cannot escape his fate, to be what he is created to be, namely, a product of scientific materialism in the most literal sense. There is dissimilarity between Darwin’s theory of contractibility and Godwin’s inclination towards the necessitarian belief that man is necessarily a product of environment. The question is merely a matter of emphasis: Is the moral decision of the monster determined by his surrounding environment, or rather, by the bodily sensations or feelings produced by his own responsiveness?

4. Imprisonment of the Soul

One of the most prominent features of the novel is that not only do many characters die, but the protagonists, Victor and the monster, both hasten to face death towards the end of the novel. Victor, in his deathbed, says “this hour, when I momentarily expect my

release, is the only happy one which I have enjoyed for several years" (*Frankenstein* 186), and the monster also cannot wait to "find rest" in death: "I shall die" (*Frankenstein* 190). The monster is glad that he "shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume [him], or be the prey of feelings unsatisfied, yet unquenched" (ibid.). This is curiously reminiscent of Edward Young's negative apprehension of being alive on earth. As Janet Todd maintains, the poet "trumpeted his joy in the sensation of the universe", but at the same time "he felt a Christian apprehension of earth as transient and negative. God was both excitingly vast and vastly distant from humanity."²⁵⁶ Young's world picture shows disaster, discomfort, pain and sorrow. Most of "this terraqueous Globe" for him is "a Waste, Rocks, Deserts, frozen Seas, and burning Sands; / Wild haunts of Monsters, Poison, Stings and Death."²⁵⁷

Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas* (1759), which Shelley read in July, 1817, thematises the "choice of life" by giving glimpses of various forms of life including the European life of "knowledge,"²⁵⁸ shepherds' "pastoral simplicity" (*Rasselas* 82) and "private recesses of domestick peace" (*Rasselas* 89). Imlac, the mentor of the prince and princess of Abissinia, admonishes them that there is not one who does not "dread the moment when solitude should deliver him to the tyranny of reflection" even if he seems happy on the surface, for happiness is a "pleasing delusion" (*Rasselas* 76). Johnson's portraiture of solitary men represents the emerging cult of reflection, also observed in Young's *Night Thoughts*. Imlac is pessimistic about the "choice of life" for "[v]ery few . . . live by choice." Frankenstein's monster is the

²⁵⁶ Janet Todd (1986), p.52.

²⁵⁷ Edward Young, *Night Thoughts* ed. Stephen Cornford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Night I.285-87.

²⁵⁸ Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* ed. D.J.Enright (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1976), p.65. Hereafter cited as *Rasselas* with page

embodiment of the melancholic and reflective subject. He was from the start deprived of parents, food, money or an amiable appearance that may win him the sympathy of a stranger. The monster's narrative is filled with the "pain of reflection" (*Frankenstein* 116) and he indulges himself in self-pity.

Victor, on the other hand, is "busy" (*Rasselas* 149) like Rasselas and Imlac in the choice of life. Domestic happiness is a recurrent theme of that "happy valley" which is the "seat of tranquility" (*Rasselas* 42), or more appropriately "tasteless tranquility" (*Rasselas* 72), from which Rasselas and his sister, Nekayah, escape. Similarly Victor is not content with his tranquil life with his family: he "ardently desired the acquisition of knowledge" and "thought it hard to remain [at home] during my youth cooped up in one place, and had longed to enter the world" (*Frankenstein* 28).

Why is it that Victor, who ardently sought "immortality and power" (*Frankenstein* 29), after accomplishing his goal, can no longer bear to live in this world? The structure of the novel has a striking resemblance with that of *Rasselas*. Imlac and the prince of Abissinia set out on a journey in pursuit of the "Truth" about what choice they should make to be happy in the world. Victor's ideal vision of happiness is that

A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs

(*Frankenstein* 36).

Just like Rasselas who is determined to find which mode of life would conduct him to happiness, Victor never doubts that the attainment of knowledge would enable him to

numbers in parentheses.

realise his dream, which he believes to be everyone's choice of life. Mummifying the body in ancient Egypt, according to Imlac, teaches a lesson from which one can learn the futility of "eluding death": "it is commonly supposed that the Egyptians believed the soul to live as long as the body continued undissolved, and therefore tried this method of eluding death" (*Rasselas* 146). Victor's scientific pursuit, in one sense, parodies the desperate human effort to cling to the corpse for the sustenance of life. When Walton, an explorer, encounters the creature for the first time, he "cannot find words to describe" him except by comparing his features to those of a "mummy" (*Frankenstein* 187). In his expression there is a melancholic tone that expresses the monster's helplessness at being both dead and alive at the same time.

When we turn our attention to Shelley's short stories, there are passages which show her scepticism or even repugnance towards subverting mortality. In 'The Mortal Immortal' (1833), Shelley has her protagonist, Winzy, become a pupil of an alchemist, Cornelius Agrippa, who succeeds in creating the "Elixir of Immortality." Even after consuming the elixir, Winzy is not convinced of his master's account that the liquid will endow him with immortal life, and thinks that

[Agrippa] was a wise philosopher, but had no acquaintance with any spirits but those clad in flesh and blood. His science was simply human and human science, I soon persuaded myself, could never conquer nature's laws so far as to *imprison the soul forever within its carnal habitation*.²⁵⁹

The rhetoric is dominantly theological, which consequently eclipses the scientific and philosophical ramifications. This is not exactly a reiteration of Godwin's critical

²⁵⁹ Mary Shelley, 'The Mortal Immortal' (1833) in *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories* ed. Charles E. Robinson (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.224. Italics added. Hereafter cited as *Mortal* with page numbers in

reference to materialism, which, he says, “clogs” the body to the necessitarian system (*PJ* 362). Rather, it comes nearer Wollstonecraft’s sentimental notions of death as an escape from the body: “But an immortal soul, not restrained by mechanical laws and struggling to free itself from the shackles of matter, contributes to, instead of disturbing, the order of creation” (*VRW* 116). This is what Joseph Priestley had inveighed against, the metaphysical notion that the “body is necessarily a clog, and an impediment to the soul” (*Disquisitions* 44). It is ironic that the body “imprison[s]” the soul forever in “The Mortal Immortal,” and also the same body is compared to the “cage” of the soul in her other short story, ‘Transformation’ (1830),²⁶⁰ for it was “immortality” and not the “imprisonment” of the soul that the early scientists had pursued in searching for the philosopher’s stone. Victor’s creation can be best apprehended as a specific response not just to the scientific controversy over whether a dead body or matter can be animated, but to the theological question that accuses the body of being the fetters or “receptacle” of an otherwise free spirit. In other words, by setting a scientific experiment that infuses life into an inanimate body, Shelley was able to address a highly problematical yet controversial issue: What makes it worth while to live, what is the “choice of life”?

If “animating” the dead body only represents the “imprisonment” of the immortal and immaterial soul, what is the meaning of the monster’s revived life and his moral education? The Enlightenment context provided a new angle for thinking about life. For some, life was no longer a testing ground for Judgment which becomes a gateway to heaven. Darwin, for example, adopts the Lockean sensational psychology in elaborating on the origin of good and evil, arguing that “all animals have a similar

parentheses.

²⁶⁰ Mary Shelley, ‘Transformation’ in *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories* ed. Charles E. Robinson (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976),

origin, viz, from a single filament; that the difference of their forms and qualities has arisen *only from the different irritabilities and sensibilities ... of this original living filament*" (*Zoonomia* i 498, Italics added).

Andrew Baxter, an eighteenth-century theologian had argued that matter is evil while the spirit is good presents a sharp contrast with Darwin's materialism, and Priestley refuted Baxter's immaterial system." For both Darwin and Priestley, there is no logical explanation as to how an "unembodied spirit" can animate the body in the first place if the body is already evil. Priestley finds a contradiction in Baxter's argument, for if the soul has to be "subject to such a confinement" as the latter has suggested, great is "the risk that the immaterial soul runs by its union with this gross material body." For Priestley, there is nothing more pessimistic about life than such a tenet that considers the body as the "fettters," and his censuring the idea of the body being a "dreadful contagion of flesh and blood" (*Disquisitions* 47) certainly reminds us of Winzy's soliloquy. Like Godwin's St. Leon, Winzy's beautiful and youthful form is retained throughout. While Winzy's retains eternal youth, the beauty of his wife Bertha is gradually lost in time. Just as the monster in *Frankenstein* is abhorred and detested by others, Winzy was "regarded with horror and detestation," (*Mortal* 227) which makes him call his eternal youth a "disease" (*Mortal* 229). It is hence not the trepidation of death but that of life that makes him abhor the "imprisonment" of the soul in his body: "Am I immortal? I return to my first question. In the first place, is it not more probable that the beverage of the alchymist was fraught rather with longevity than eternal life? Such is my hope" (*ibid.*).

Shelley's negative depiction of the soul forcibly confined in the body is

dramatised or perhaps caricatured by the monstrous creation. The monster's cry is a plea for mortality, "Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?" (*Frankenstein* 110). The question is, from a mere spark how was it possible for the monster to intellectually rise above the level of the brutes. Shelley's version of the monster is far from being irrational. He is an embodiment of an "organized being" whose organic parts have their own logic, but at the same time, his narrative demonstrates his capacity to reason and to make sense of his being.

There is also a profound irony in contradicting the cultural representation of the uncontrollable and uneducated "monster," because it is not lack of knowledge or language but the acquirement of these things required of human beings that brought about rage and violence in the creature, and made him a monster. The story that the monster tells is a miniature or compressed version of natural history describing the anthropological development from animals to human beings. At first, the monster could only perceive "light, hunger, thirst and darkness," and he only wept from physical pain like an animal. Thus, just as Imlac contemplates the simple life of the "goats," the monster recollects his initial stage of being. His sense of self was not even formed until he acquired "ideas" through his senses of vision and hearing, for "[n]o distinct ideas occupied [his] mind; all was confused" (*Frankenstein* 80). Imlac compares himself with a beast and says, "I am, like him, pained with want, but am not, like him, satisfied with fullness [of being fed]" (*Rasselas* 43). Likewise, the primitive sensations of the monster are directed towards the "clear stream that supplied me with drink, and the trees that shaded me with the foliage" and he was "delighted when [he] first discovered a pleasant sound" of the little winged animals "who had often intercepted the light from my eyes"

(*Frankenstein* 81). So long as there are no specific ideas, there is no reason for the monster to despair. This logic, that insatiable passions are born from increasing ideas and the linguistic capacity to categorise these ideas, follows that of the sensational theorists such as Hartley and La Mettrie, and also Rousseau's theory in *Discourse*. Gradually he understands psychological pain through observing the De Lacy family express pain, and through hearing them speak the words that produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness in the minds and countenances of the hearers (*Frankenstein* 88).

Paradoxically, the monster uses logic to explain why he became impulsive. Culturally "monsters" are supposed to be dominated by irrational rage and passions, but in fact, rational judgment and irrational feeling coexist in this particular monster, which in actuality makes him most humane. Only through his narrative does he communicate these humane qualities to the reader. He is virtually torn between his fibrous body which, he claims, gives rise to "perceptions and passions" (*Frankenstein* 114), and his rational judgment. The creature is no less human than his creator is, for Victor's fierce passion for his intellectual pursuit is never extinguished until the toil is finally over. Similarly, the monster cannot overrule his "sentiment of hatred" (*Frankenstein* 114), "burning passion" (*Frankenstein* 118), or the "sensations" of "horror and hatred" (*Frankenstein* 121). Yet the monster rationally appeals to his creator in order to persuade him to create a female monster:

I am content to reason with you. I am malicious because I am miserable; am I not shunned and hated by all mankind? You, my creator, would tear me to pieces, and triumph; remember that, and tell me why I should pity man more than he pities me? (*Frankenstein* 119)

He claims that he was at first "benevolent" and "mild" but his nature turned into

“bitterness” when he grew capable of understanding both emotionally and socially that he was shamed by his creator and next by the De Lacy family who were closest to his existence. Human beings are not born with reason, knowledge or language. They develop with irritabilities and sensibilities, for they are inevitably linked with “thought and feeling.” The persecution became unbearable only because he learns to decipher the linguistic signs of others. He justifies the murder of Victor’s brother, William, by loss of his emotional control: “I was the slave, not the master of an impulse” (*Frankenstein* 188). But more immediately, it was the words, “epithets,” that carried despair to the heart of the monster, triggering him to murder William (*Frankenstein* 117).

Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling; but I learned that there was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death—a state which I feared yet did not understand. (*Frankenstein* 96)

Only by death can he sever the sensations that he has accumulated. In other words, he knows that the only thing that will stop the “pain of reflection” is death. As knowledge increases, he is induced to confront his own situation, which points to the fact that he possesses “no money, no friends, no kind of property” (*Frankenstein* 96).

Unlike the ancient Egyptians, Darwin celebrates death as much as he does life, for the parents’ improvements are materially bequeathed to posterity, as he claims, “Where climate is favourable, and salubrious food plentiful, there is reason to believe, that the races of animals perpetually improve by reproduction” (*TN Additional Notes* 37). If, on the contrary, the soul is immaterial and the body material, “neither the generation nor the destruction of the body can have any effect with respect to it”

(*Disquisitions* 41), implying that there will be no improvements of mind or moral standards. Like the organic theorists, Priestley's notion of an organic being is defined as that which "grow[s], ripen[s] and decay[s] together" (*Disquisitions* 49). He asserts that, since "all the faculties of the mind, separately taken, appear to be mortal, the substance, or principle in which they exist must be pronounced to be mortal too," in other words, corporeal (*Disquisitions* 36). When the brain ceases to function, one ceases to think or feel. This is what the monster anticipates when he collects his "funeral pile" so as not to create "this miserable and unhallowed wretch, who would create such another as I have been." But at the same time he "shall no longer see the sun or stars, or feel the winds play on [his] cheeks" (*Frankenstein* 190). While he anxiously seeks peace of mind in death, the following passage presents ambivalence: "Polluted by crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death?" (*ibid.*) This most probably signifies that he CAN find rest in death, but it can also suggest that (knowing he cannot rest after death) he is still seeking a place where he can rest forever. He hopes that what he now feels will no longer be felt and "[s]oon these burning miseries will be extinct" (*Frankenstein* 191), but there still remains a question mark: "My spirit will sleep in peace; or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus" (*ibid.*). After all, even Darwin's idea of the animal spirit is equivocal in that he acknowledges that it is capable of "existing separately from the body as with it." The monster's life is a celebration of primitive sensations that give birth to "pleasure" and "warmth" and at the same time profound grief of feeling "pain" and "cold." When Shelley has the monster think "on the choice of eternity" (*Rasselas* 149), like Nekayah, Shelley perhaps has in mind her mother's image of the afterlife, that the soul is elevated to become purer.

In her short story, "Valerius: The Reanimated Roman" (1826), Shelley explores

the possibility of an existence after death. It is a tale about a Roman knight who is reanimated in “modern times,” but the narrator concludes that he belongs to “the dead.” In a sense, there is a structural resemblance with ‘Roger Dodsworth’ in that both thematise animated life. Unlike Roger Dodsworth, there is no specific depiction of how and why Valerius was resuscitated, but interestingly, Shelley highlights the problem of what “links” one to “our world” and what “snaps” the link.²⁶¹ Valerius is devastated by the transformation of Rome. He wants to “judge if, after the great fluctuation in human affairs, man is nearer perfection than in my days” before he dies again (*Valerius* 341). Godwinian perfectibility is questioned, and is utterly denied in the narrative. The narrator of this tale wishes in vain that he could revive the hope of Valerius. The only feeling which “animates the soul” he believes is a “strong sympathy with beauty” (*Valerius* 342). He asks himself “Did Valerius sympathize with me?” Shelley is suggesting that the feeling of sympathy is the only thing that “links” one’s spirit (or ghost) to the world of the living (*Valerius* 343). *Frankenstein* demonstrates a case that one cannot bear to live in the world if there is no link or sympathy.

²⁶¹ Mary Shelley, ‘Valerius: The Reanimated Roman’ (1826) in *Mary Shelley: Collected Tales and Stories* ed. Charles E. Robinson. (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp.340-343. Hereafter cited as *Valerius* with page numbers in parentheses.

8

**'Sex in souls or not':
Physiognomy and Voice**

The issue of whether the faculties of the mind are independent from the operation of the corporeal body was problematised in the representation of Shelley's monster as I have discussed in the previous chapter. Both Godwin and Wollstonecraft had set out theoretically and demonstratively to prove that the rational mind or soul can independently affect the operation of the body. Yet they were both aware of the contradictory notions inscribed in Lockean philosophy and medical writings, for the sensibility of the body affects the malleable nature of one's identity. It was precisely this paradox that puzzled Shelley's imagination and possibly diminished her confidence in the power of the mind. Would rationality always have the upperhand over the body? If not, would it submit to the reign of passions with possibly negative consequences? These questions probably stirred Shelley's mind when conceiving the story of *Frankenstein*.

As I have already mentioned in the earlier chapter, Rousseau is sceptical of the operation of the soul as that which controls the body. He talks of the soul as something external to him. He "knows it exists" but says he has "nothing to do with producing or annihilating [it]" (*Emile* 270). Interestingly, Shelley follows Rousseau, rather than Wollstonecraft, in depicting the soul. The soul, Shelley believes, cannot be controlled by reason. In the 1831 edition, the soul is seen as something alien by the protagonist Victor

Frankenstein.²⁶² When Victor's intellectual curiosity is stimulated by the lecture delivered by M. Waldman, he feels as if his "soul were grappling with a palpable enemy," namely the "secrets of nature." Shelley personifies the soul, and inserts her indirect speech; the soul of Frankenstein exclaimed "So much has been done."²⁶³ He calls the soul "my internal being which was then in a state of insurrection and turmoil," and there is a sense of resignation in the way Victor deals with this disorder; "I felt that order would thence arise, but I had no power to produce it" (*Frankenstein* 1831, 47). This gives an impression that Shelley presents an opposite picture of subjectivity from Wollstonecraft, who insists on the existence of the rational soul, and endorses the power of the mind. Shelley equates the "soul" with immoderate passion that takes over the mind, as she makes her protagonist say, "I was easily led . . . to give utterance to the burning ardour of my soul" (*Frankenstein* 1831, 27). Even though they take opposite positions on the issues of the rational soul, Shelley and Wollstonecraft actually display the same anxiety about the body being a constrictive factor.

While *Frankenstein* bears the same paradox that the rational mind does not necessarily rule over the body, we are also made aware of the imperatives of the body from Shelley's journal. She reflects on her mother's character while commenting on sexual difference:

My Mother had more energy of character—still she had not sufficient fire of imagination—In short my belief is—whether there be sex in souls or not—that the sex of our [female] material mechanism makes us quite different

²⁶² It is difficult to know why the passage about the soul was added to the text in the 1831 edition and was not mentioned in the 1818 edition.

²⁶³ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*. 1831 ed. Maurice Hindle. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992), p.47. To distinguish with the 1818 edition, this edition will be cited as *Frankenstein* 1831 with page numbers in parentheses.

creatures—better though weaker but wanting in the higher grades of intellect.²⁶⁴

The emphasis is clearly on the body, and the material facts of sex, which is hence different from her mother's doctrine. Wollstonecraft puts emphasis on the development of intellect rather than on physical difference, for the intellectual capacity can be modified by the "education of the body." While she politicized the concept of soul to be a gender-free entity, her daughter considers the physiological make-up of the body, and therefore sexual difference, as the determinant of the soul. Compared with Wollstonecraft's educationist stance, Shelley's statement therefore seems much less engaged in the process of changing "things as they are." Shelley's approach to politics fundamentally differs from her mother, for she does not vindicate the "equal" rights of women, but believes in their "different" quality. The heroines of Wollstonecraft's novels are female geniuses, whereas the protagonist of her daughter's *Frankenstein* is a male overreacher.²⁶⁵ Moreover, the female characters such as Caroline, Elizabeth and Justine in the novel represent the feminine sphere of domesticity, as many critics have pointed out. Unable to piece together such a puzzle, some critics have made Safie, a minor character with a "masculine energy," the "incarnation of Mary Wollstonecraft,"²⁶⁶ so as to locate the mother's influence in Shelley's work. However the question remains: Is the

²⁶⁴ Letter addressed to Maria Gisborne on 11 June 1835. *Selected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley* ed. Betty T. Bennett (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p.257.

²⁶⁵ The protagonists of her major works such as *The Last Man*, *Valperga*, *Lodore* and *Falkner* (except, of course, *Mathilda*) are also male.

²⁶⁶ Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York & London: Methuen, 1988), p.118. Johanna Smith also argues that Safie is reminiscent of Wollstonecraft in that she, unlike Elizabeth and Justine, learns from her mother "to aspire to higher powers of intellect and an independence of spirit." See Johanna M. Smith's "Cooped Up": Feminine Domesticity in *Frankenstein* In *Mary Shelley: Frankenstein* (Bedford: Books of St. Martin's Press, 1992), p.283.

depiction of a masculine woman the only legacy of Wollstonecraft traceable in her daughter's novel? In this chapter, I would like to draw attention to two branches of medical studies, physiognomy and phrenology, that were current in their time. By analysing 'The Cave of Fancy' and *Frankenstein*, I will try to show how these two medical approaches help explain the fundamental differences between Wollstonecraft and Shelley in putting forward their gender issues.

1. Lavater's Physiognomy

Both physiognomy and phrenology are sciences²⁶⁷ that provide clues to understanding a person's character by examining physical appearances. In other words, they both give specific guidelines to understanding the moral and intellectual features of a person by judging the shape of his or her face (or head). Johann Casper Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*²⁶⁸ was a tremendous success in the continent as well as in Britain.²⁶⁹ His physiognomical study is not merely based on an abstract theory of the human countenance, but also on a concrete analysis of people in the flesh, in engravings and in silhouettes. For this purpose, Lavater obtained help from many artists, and amongst

²⁶⁷ Although Lavater's physiognomy was often derided as a "pseudo-science" by his reviewers, he has called his physiognomical system "science" in his *Essays on Physiognomy*. This is made clear in the author's preface which is attached to Henry Hunter's edition: "The whole science of Physiognomy, taken in the most extensive; as well as in the most restricted sense, rests, beyond contradiction, on these universal and incontestable principles." See *Essays on Physiognomy* 3 vols. Trans. Henry Hunter (London 1810), p.18.

²⁶⁸ All citations are to *Essays on Physiognomy; for the Promotion of the Knowledge and Love of Mankind* trans. by Thomas Holcroft (London: G.G.J. & J.Robinson, 1789). Hereafter cited as *EP* with page numbers in parentheses.

²⁶⁹ After its initial success in German (five publications in the 1770s, four in the 1780s), the French translation of the 1780s introduced it to a still wider audience. This was followed by the two English editions in the 1780s including the most complete Henry Hunter translation. By the 1790s no fewer than twelve English versions in five different translations were published. See John Graham's 'Lavater's Physiognomy in England' in *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol.XXII.No.4, (1961), p.562.

them Henry Fuseli was one of the most renowned. During the 1760s and 1770s, Fuseli kept in constant touch with Lavater, and contributed engravings to the French and English editions. He was also a close friend of Wollstonecraft and Joseph Johnson's circle.²⁷⁰ Physiognomy's extraordinary popularity at the end of the eighteenth century can be confirmed by a number of reviews which appeared between the 1780s and the 1800s.²⁷¹ British periodicals such as *The Monthly Review*, *The European Magazine* and *The Gentleman's Magazine* gave substantial details of Lavater's method in their reviews.²⁷² Therefore the peak of Lavater's popularity coincided with the period when Wollstonecraft was actively involved in the contemporary political debate and writing her literary works. She was greatly influenced by Lavater's *Essays*, and she even attempted a translation. This attempt however was held back by Thomas Holcroft's earlier release of his translation.²⁷³

If physiognomy is the study of the human face and countenance, phrenology is the study of the shape of the human head. The distinction is difficult to maintain, however, for these branches of science have a common feature. Both tried to understand

²⁷⁰ Wollstonecraft actually met Lavater in person through Fuseli. Fuseli, a Swiss artist, came to settle in London in 1764 and remained in England for the rest of his life. See William St Clair (1989), p.262.

²⁷¹ Although it is easy to understand why Lavater is identified as the inventor of physiognomy seeing his great reputation, the origin of this science is difficult to pin down. As Graeme Tytler has argued, physiognomy had probably been an integral part of most cultures long before it became a formal branch of study. See Graeme Tytler's *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1982), p.35.

²⁷² John Graham (1961), pp.564-5. The review in *The Gentleman's Magazine* connected physiognomy with the medical and philosophical traditions of the western world. See *The Gentleman's Magazine* Vol.LXXX (1799), p.948.

²⁷³ The popularity of Lavater's theory can be observed from contemporary novels such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Desmond*. Charlotte Smith has her heroine, Geraldine, say that she "contend[s] for Lavater's sytem" and has her use Desmond's countenance in support of her argument: "His was the most open, ingenuous countenance I had ever seen; and his manners, as well as all I could then know of his heart and his temper, were exactly such as that countenance indicated" (*Desmond* 160,

the interior features of a person by analysing the exterior. Like Lavater who gathered numerous pictures or engravings of people's faces, Gall collected "casts of individuals remarkable for any quality, whether talent or moral sentiment" (*Outlines* 53). Though methodologically Lavater and Gall conducted the same kind of research, namely accumulating specimens in support of their theories, the former studied the two-dimensional faces of the literary masters, but Gall examined the three-dimensional "busts" of individuals who excelled in the same skills (*ibid.*). Even with these differences, the designations are confusing. Francois-Joseph Gall's phrenological study is often labelled "physiognomy."²⁷⁴ Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, the student of Gall, has entitled his theory as the "physiognomical system" and C.W.Hufeland's book on Gall's theory is called *Dr Gall's New Theory of Physiognomy*.²⁷⁵ Having said this, when it comes to the discussion of how the soul and the body are linked to each other, there is a great disparity between Lavater's theory and that of Gall and Spurzheim. To elaborate, while Lavater tended to perceive physical appearances as the "signs" or traces of the spiritual self, Gall tended to see them as the cause.²⁷⁶

For Lavater, the physical features of a man are the manifestation or materialisation of the spirit, so he searches for the signs of his or her power of mind and

161).

²⁷⁴ See for example the title of *Outlines*. See also Johann Casper Spurzheim's *Physiognomical System of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim; Founded on an Anatomical and Physiological Examination of the Nervous System in General, and the Brain in Particular* (London: Baldwin, 1815).

²⁷⁵ C.W.Hufeland, *Dr Gall's New Theory of Physiognomy Founded upon the Anatomy and Physiology of the Brain, and the form of the Skull* (London, 1807). Hereafter cited as *New Theory* with page numbers in parentheses.

²⁷⁶ For the sake of clarity, I will call the former (Lavater's theory) "physiognomy" and the latter (Gall's theory) "phrenology." I consider physiognomy to be more spiritual or religious than phrenology, and phrenology more materialistic. Of course, it would be inaccurate to characterise Gall's theory as purely materialistic, for his theory too has spiritual elements, especially in his later works. It is because I wish to crystallise the implication of these two approaches that I draw a rather schematic picture of them.

character in his or her features.

The question will stand simply thus: Whether it be possible to explain the undeniable striking differences which exist between human faces and forms, not by obscure and confused conceptions, but by certain characters, signs, and expressions? Whether these *signs* can communicate the strength and weakness, health and sickness of the body; the folly and wisdom, the magnanimity and meanness, the virtue and vice of the mind? (*EP* 2, italics added)

He has thus tried to draw a concrete explanation of how the moral character of a person is manifest in his or her face and form. Although both Godwin and Wollstonecraft are against the idea that the physical structure of the body wholly determines the intellectual capacity of the mind, they may have shared a similar curiosity with Lavater in contriving a method of reading a person's power of mind from outside.

2. Wollstonecraft and Physiognomy

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft has criticised the “sexual characteristics” of women such as “dependence,” “weak elegance of mind” and “exquisite sensibility” (*VRW* 175). She encourages women to “unfold their faculties” because she considers them to be “rational creatures” who are no different from men (*VRW* 74, 75). Insofar as the word “masculine” connotes the imitation of manly virtues or the attainment of those talents and virtues, she wishes that women would everyday grow more and more masculine (*VRW* 74). It is therefore not surprising that her rationalist ideal has been understood by her critics as a project towards the masculinisation of the mind.²⁷⁷ As I have argued in Chapter 5, the soul for

²⁷⁷ Keith Michael Baker, ‘Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France:

Wollstonecraft signifies the mind or intellectual properties, and it is the “dignity” of the female soul that is at stake in a corrupt civilized society. By detaching the soul from the enervated female body, she tries to picture a whole new body in which reason and understanding could be cultivated. I have also argued that this approach contradicted her progressive ideas that had their base in Lockean associationism and Hartley’s materialism. She acknowledges the tenaciousness of the associations impressed on the body with “mechanical exactness,” and also admits that they can seldom be “disentangled by reason” (*VRW* 186). The implication is that the “vicious association” has to be overcome by the interaction of the mind *and* body.

Despite this paradox, she was persistent in her position as an anti-materialist. She was hopeful that an “immortal soul, not restrained by mechanical laws” would free itself from the shackles of matter (*VRW* 116). This image is reminiscent of Baxter’s dualist view of the body and soul which I discussed in the previous chapter. Lavater, as Tytler has argued, put forward his physiognomical theories by blending theology and science.²⁷⁸ His religious sentiment can be observed from the following passage.

How spiritual, how incorporeal soever his internal essence may be, still is *he* only visible and conceivable from the harmony of his constituent parts. From these he is inseparable. *He* exists and moves in the body he inhabits, as in his element. (*EP* 23, italics added)

The idea that the spiritual part and the “visible” or “constituent” parts are “inseparable” seems to confirm his materialist view that the soul is attached to the body. However,

Variations on a Theme by Habermas’ In *Habermas and the Public Sphere* Ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1992), p.205. See also Mary Poovey (1984) and Mary Jacobus’s ‘The Difference of View’ in *Women Writing and Writing about Women* ed. Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1979).

²⁷⁸ Graeme Tytler (1982), p.54.

“his internal essence” and the pronoun “he” indicates the existence of an independent entity that “inhabits” the body. In this respect Wollstonecraft’s ambivalence in some ways reflects Lavater’s notion of selfhood and its spirituality.

It is difficult to judge to what extent Wollstonecraft’s ontological thinking is an echo of Lavater’s system, but the analytical method must have proven appealing in writing her moralistic works. This is suggested in her unfinished story, “The Cave of Fancy.” The sage called Sagestus is portrayed as a person acquainted with a certain knowledge that allows him to understand or read “the shape of the solid structure, how far the spirit could range” (*CF* 194). This is clearly a reverberation of Lavater’s theory, and the narrator’s statement that Sagestus “was perfectly acquainted with the construction of the human body” is also a confirmation of this. When he encounters the dead bodies which were washed ashore by a shipwreck, he begins to examine them as if he were a medical expert or a physiognomist: “he . . . walked leisurely among the dead, and narrowly observed their pallid features” (*ibid.*).

After giving analyses of a several dead bodies whose features indicate “melancholy,” “the quick senses which conveyed intelligence,” “timid[ity]” or “indolence” (*CF* 194, 195), he finds a dead man who appears to have died saving an orphan girl, Sagesta. This male body is described as “inanimate clay” which lately had been the “dwelling of a most benevolent spirit” (*CF* 196). The head of this man is “square, though the features were not very prominent; but there was a great harmony in every part, and the turn of the nostrils and lips evinced, that the soul must have had taste, to which they had served as organs” (*ibid.*). Sagestus concludes from these well-proportioned features that the man was “all heart, full of forbearance, and desirous to please every fellow-creature;/ but from a nobler motive than a love of admiration; the

fumes of vanity never mounted to cloud his brain, or tarnish his beneficence” (ibid).

The features observable from Sagesta’s dead mother are presented as a quintessential case of a hyper-delicate woman enervated by “an improper education” (CF 197). A delicacy in her form, which is characterised as “truly feminine,” according to Sagestus’s analysis, was aggravated by this wrong kind of education, because it “took away all vigour from her faculties.” This is affirmed by the fact that “few traces” of exertions of the mind appear on her face (ibid.), and this approach in finding “signs” or “traces” is deeply evocative of Lavater’s view that the physical features mirror the development of the soul. The foolish person is often compared to an inhuman object or a “machine” in Wollstonecraft’s works, and Eliza in *Mary* is perhaps the most representative. This image is recurrent in this story. Sagesta’s mother is likened to a machine whose “wheels . . . [had been] clogged by prejudices” and never turned quite round (ibid.). We get a glimpse of Wollstonecraft’s caustic criticism through the sage’s sober view about the death of Sagesta’s mother. Sagestus in the end is convinced that “the orphan was not very unfortunate in having lost such a mother” (CF 198).

As I have discussed in Chapter 4, the female spirit in ‘The Cave of Fancy’ occupies an equally significant position in that she is perhaps a major spokesperson for Wollstonecraft’s philosophy. We must not however forget that this spirit is a representation of what seems to be the opposite of the physiognomical study. In chapter 3 of ‘The Cave of Fancy’ where the female spirit begins her story, Wollstonecraft turns her attention from the “countenance” to the “voice” that speaks truth:

The mouth, in fact, seems to be the feature where you may trace every kind of dissimulation, from the simper of vanity, to the fixed smile of the designing villain. Perhaps, the modulations of the voice will still more quickly give a key

to the character than even the turns of the mouth, or the words that issue from it; often do the tones of unpractised dissemblers give the lie to their assertions.

(*CF* 199)

The locus of the “trace” of one’s character is thus shifted from the “mouth” to the “voice.” The voice is here given more importance than the “turns of the mouth” or the “words.” By conceiving a fictional story in which a disembodied “spirit” teaches a “useful lesson,” Wollstonecraft is able to take the reader’s eyes away from her physiognomical features to her “voice.” We are not given any information about the spirit’s physical appearance, nor are we encouraged to find out the exterior features of this subject. We are merely given a story of her life as a dutiful daughter through her “voice,” though her secret passion for a true lover is disclosed. It is interesting to observe that what gives this spirit “identity” is not her countenance or physical form, but the “activity of soul” and the “eccentric warmth” (*CF* 204) of her person. What is at issue here is, as Barbara Taylor has hinted, the possibility of women’s imaginative grandeur. She problematises the fact that women are consigned, like the shipwrecked mother in the tale, to the pretty and the petty. The narrative of the female spirit itself throws light on the issue about the physical handicap that women carries. It is therefore convincing that Taylor presents the “female spirit” as “a proto-feminist whose sublimity points to a moral stature rarely accorded women.”²⁷⁹ The body should not be a “shackle” of the soul, for Wollstonecraft. It is merely a visible quality of self that presents traces of its development.

²⁷⁹ Barbara Taylor (2003), p.64.

3. The Misreading of the Monster

It was Shelley's essentialist view that broadened the philosophical chasm between her and her mother. It would not be possible to explain Shelley's materialism wholly in the framework of the phrenological system, for it was probably the entire eighteenth-century medical and philosophical tradition that helped consolidate her views about gender identities. Still I would like to argue that Gall's anatomical analyses of the brain or the shape of the head have played a great part in the formation of Shelley's philosophical ideas about the body, the female sex, and selfhood. As there is a mention of "Mr. Gall" in her journal on September 16, 1814, behind Shelley's essentialism lies Gall's theory of the "organology" (*Outlines* 29) which is firmly set against her parents' theory of perfectibility.²⁸⁰ Gall's methodology is strictly based on the study of organs. When, for example, he finds any unusual swelling in the head, he considers it to be the result of cerebral development (*Outlines* 50). He also collects sample cases to prove that a development of a particular part of the brain is the cause of a certain human behaviour. In these two ways, Spurzheim maintains, Gall characterised each organ (*ibid*). Hartley's mechanical associationism may be classed in the same materialist philosophy as the doctrine of Gall and Spurzheim, but he has left room for ongoing improvement or change in the character of a person. I will cite an interesting passage from Hufeland's statement about Gall's theory:

There is a concluding remark which may indispose those towards Gall's theory, who cannot hinder the intrusion of moral feeling into the field of natural observation. This doctrine repels the notion of the Perfectibility of Man, by

²⁸⁰ The Shelleys were acquainted with Louis-Marie Prudhomme who had edited Gall's book.

which I mean his indefinite improveability: for the bounds seem to be fixed in his physical organisation. (*New Theory* 35)

As Hufeland has argued, the perfectible nature of man would be deterred by the material facts of the body, if they are “fixed” from birth as in the case of Gall’s phrenology. Contrary to Godwin and Wollstonecraft, Spurzheim censures the opinion that considers education to be a cause of the faculties of the mind. He maintains that “[c]hildren sometimes show particular dispositions and faculties before they have received any kind of instruction” (*Outlines* 267). The “[o]rganic theory” (*New Theory* 24) has attacked the empiricist view which maintains “men are born not only without character, but also absolutely indifferent to all character, without any tendency or disposition of any kind whatever” (*New Theory* 20).

It is understandable that Godwin was sceptical of phrenological theory which was far too deterministic for his philosophy. For him it would take away one’s “free will.”²⁸¹ In fact there is an anecdote of Godwin specifically linking him with physiognomical interest. Godwin asked his neighbour to conduct a physiognomical analysis of Mary Shelley in 1797, then only a newborn infant. “Mr Nicholson,” a physiognomist, described and analysed Shelley’s face and head.²⁸² In his biography of Mary Shelley, Christopher Small summarises the analysis of Nicholson in the following passage:

He saw in the new-born child signs of “considerable memory and intelligence,” “quick sensibility, irritable, scarcely irascible and surely not

²⁸¹ Graham argues that the reason why Godwin could not accept Gall’s phrenological thinking, while celebrating Lavater’s physiognomy, was because the former does not permit “free will.” See John Graham (1961), p.567.

²⁸² Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley* eds. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p.26

given to rage”; not much evidence of persistence in “investigation”—“I think her powers, of themselves, would lead to speedy combination, rather than continued research.” He could not say very much on the shape of Mary’s mouth, it being “too much employed to be well observed”—the baby was evidently crying—but, remarking that “she was displeased,” noted in her expression “more of resigned vexation than either scorn or rage.” His conclusion was that “her manner may be petulant in resistance, but cannot be sullen.”²⁸³

But this episode is rather perplexing, for Godwin, a believer in the Lockean notion of the *tabula rasa*, would not have conceded the idea that a human being is born with a character. Examining the face of a newborn child would mean that his or her moral and intellectual capacities are in one way or another set before birth, and this view is at odds with his perfectible view.

In taking issue with the philosophy of Helvetius²⁸⁴ and Hartley and in sympathising with Gall’s organic theory, Hufeland introduces Helvetius’s famous story about “a boy who used to be left alone in a room with a great clock, and afterwards became a great mechanic” (*New Theory* 21). He is however aware that Gall’s doctrine is “no less repulsive” than the notion introduced by Helvetius or Hartley to the common reader of his time (*New Theory* 23). It is this theory which gives preeminence to the material organs that drives Victor to the artificial creation of a man. Victor’s intention was to produce a perfect being with carefully selected parts or organs, but his creature

²⁸³ Christopher Small, *Ariel Like a Happy: Shelley, Mary and Frankenstein* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1972), pp.30, 31.

²⁸⁴ Although I am aware of the importance of Helvetius’s influence on the idea of the “indefinite improvement” of man, I have not treated his works in this thesis. I am merely mentioning his empiricist theory in passing as a French counterpart to

does not turn out to be the embodiment of beauty, let alone of perfection. Instead the finished work only excites feeling of horror and disgust in those who lay eyes on him. This characterisation of the monster alerts the reader to the extremist approach of organology. Shelley may well have thought that a person may be born with a set of moral attributes, but must have condemned the abuse of such a theory through a scientific experiment.

According to Victor, one of the phenomena which attracted his attention was “the structure of the human frame” (*Frankenstein* 33). The word “frame” implies the brain structure, the physical organisation or the bone structure that forms the head. This “frame” therefore could be an allusion to phrenology, craniology or craniology, and indicate that Victor is well-versed in these sciences. To unveil the secret of life, he “collected bones from charnel-houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame” (*Frankenstein* 36). There is a mockery of physiognomical study in the way Victor selects the body parts for his creation, for Shelley has him say that “His limbs were in proportion and I had selected his features as beautiful” (*Frankenstein* 39). The accomplishment of his toil, however, is depicted thus:

Beautiful!—Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. (*Frankenstein* 39)

The total effect produced by the extravagant use of “beautiful” parts is a “horrid

contrast.” Even the monster himself is “terrified” to see his own reflection in a transparent pool: “when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification” (*Frankenstein* 90).

Let us now observe how the physiognomical interest of Shelley’s parents is reflected in the representation of the monster. The monster’s appeal that he “was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend” instantly reminds us of the Godwinian belief that man is naturally good. The same injustice that the monster experiences in Shelley’s fiction was shown in the predicament of Caleb Williams. Laura’s contempt for Caleb, caused by reading a fictional story of his villainous act, was expressed by her words: “You are a monster, and not a man” (*CW* 300). However, Caleb’s face or countenance that expresses goodness is always justly interpreted. Brightwel, for example, is convinced of Caleb’s innocence not simply because of his persuasive eloquence, but because of “a frequent observation” that Brightwel makes of him in his “most unguarded moments” (*CW* 192). When his character is misinterpreted, it is mostly because of the prejudice against his social rank. Shelley’s monster and his character, on the other hand, are assessed solely on the basis of his appearance.

Wollstonecraft also had faith in the physiognomical reading of people’s faces, as is observable in her ‘The Cave of Fancy’; so if Shelley had followed her mother’s philosophy, she would have allowed someone to recognise the “benevolent” nature of the monster. Sagestus may likely have detected the true nature of the monster, but all the characters in *Frankenstein* including Victor and Walton “misinterpret” his character. The De Lacey family do not even know he exists, until he presents himself to the old De Lacey. However, Felix runs up to him, and mercilessly strikes him with a stick before he

can deliver his side of the story (*Frankenstein* 110). The only two people, besides Victor, who are able to listen to the monster's narrative with composure are Walton and the old man. Walton is told of Victor's experiment prior to his encounter with the monster. As to the old man, he is blind and unable to see the deformity of the monster with his own eyes, but this is the only reason why he does justice to the monster's character: "I am blind, and cannot judge of your countenance, but there is something in your words which persuades me that you are sincere" (*Frankenstein* 109). Even Walton cannot dissipate his suspicion about the monster's demonic nature. Although he is at first "touched by the expressions of the [monster's] misery," when he remembers what Victor said about the monster's powers of eloquence and persuasion, his "indignation is rekindled" (*Frankenstein* 188). Shelley illustrates the futility of trying to read the mind from physical appearances.

The monster is constantly persecuted because of his deformity, but this is in fact pointing to Shelley's objective view about physiognomy. The physical appearances of the monster are "fixed" from the moment of his birth, which belies the logic that the exterior features are a reflection of the development of the inner self. Victor's creature is thus bounded by the material body that ironically preserves his life. Paul Youngquist argues that the monster, "rational and compassionate as he is, finds himself trapped in a body that inspires disgust," and draws a conclusion that "For Shelley, body is fate."²⁸⁵ Youngquist notes that Shelley lacks her mother's confidence that the fate of sex can be overcome, but I would argue that the imperatives of the body haunted them both.

²⁸⁵ Paul Youngquist, 'Frankenstein: The Mother, the Daughter and the Monster' in *Philological Quarterly* vol.70. (1991), p.342-344.

4. The Organ of Parental and Filial Love

Wollstonecraft too felt the inevitable fate of women whose bodies can be an obstacle to the cultivation of the mind. It is just that Shelley is less pessimistic about feminine traits. Although Elizabeth Lavenza, Victor's cousin, appears to be "the most fragile creature in the world," she is portrayed as a "lively and animated" creature, and had "strong and deep" feelings (*Frankenstein* 20).²⁸⁶ Elizabeth's traits are completely dissimilar from Victor's, but the difference is said to produce "harmony" (*Frankenstein* 21) rather than antagonism. Furthermore, in the 1831 edition, this harmony is accentuated:

Harmony was the soul of our companionship, and the diversity and contrast that subsisted in our characters drew us nearer together. Elizabeth was of a calmer and more concentrated disposition; but, with all my ardour, I was capable of a more intense application, and was more deeply smitten with the thirst for knowledge. (*Frankenstein* 1831, 36)

The stress on gender difference seems to present not so much Wollstonecraft's liberal feminism as the essentialist ideas of Gall and Spurzheim. Seeing that the "propensity to take care of the young" is stronger in women than in men, Spurzheim had attributed this characteristic to the so-called "organ of philoprogenitiveness" (*Outlines* 113).

When we turn our attention to the principal female characters in *Frankenstein*, they are all depicted as "tender" (*Frankenstein* 19) and when caring for others, they are most expressive of anxiety (*Frankenstein* 48) and of affection (*Frankenstein* 26, 47). Victor's mother, Caroline Beaufort, is an incarnation of feminine affection. Caroline's picture is hung on the mantelpiece, representing her in an agony of despair, kneeling by

²⁸⁶ In the 1831 edition, Elizabeth is described as an orphan who was a daughter of a Milanese nobleman. Victor's mother was attracted by Elizabeth's appearance that strikes her as of "a being-heaven-sent, and bearing a celestial stamp in all her features"

the coffin of her dead father: "Her garb was rustic, and her cheek pale; but there was an air of dignity and beauty, that hardly permitted the sentiment of pity" (*Frankenstein* 58). Justine Moritz, an inmate of the Frankenstein family, takes over the maternal role after Caroline is deceased. She imitates Caroline in every aspect, and so much resembles Caroline that she reminds Elizabeth of her aunt.

Barbara Johnson has described these three characters as "beautiful, gentle, selfless, boring nurturers,"²⁸⁷ but did Shelley mean to censure the "nurturing" role of women? When Elizabeth catches scarlet fever, Caroline cannot "debar herself from . . . enter[ing] her chamber long before the danger of infection was past" (*Frankenstein* 26).²⁸⁸ Justine, who is wrongly accused of William's murder, is found guilty. But in the face of death, she is thinking of William whom she has taken care of in place of Caroline. "Dear William!" she exclaims, "dearest blessed child! I soon shall see you again in heaven, where we shall all be happy; and that consoles me, going as I am to suffer ignominy and death" (*Frankenstein* 66). This maternal care and attention are significantly portrayed as a heroic act.

In comparison to these female characters, Victor, the "mother" of the monster, has surrendered all duties as a parent. Gall and Spurzheim have argued that those who "are endowed with a great deal of parental love" have a more developed organ that controls paternal feeling. According to Spurzheim, they have examined the shape of the head in twenty-nine women who were infanticides, and twenty-five of them had the organ of philoprogenitiveness very small (*Outlines* 114). Hufeland has named this organ

(*Frankenstein* 1831, 34). This makes a sharp contrast with the monster's features.

²⁸⁷ Barbara Johnson, "My Monster/My Self" in *Frankenstein*, Ed. Paul Hunter, (W.W.Norton & Co., 1996), p.248.

²⁸⁸ In the 1831 edition, Caroline does more than "enter" the chamber. She attends Elizabeth's sickbed, and her "watchful attentions" actually contribute to saving her life.

“the organ of parental and filial love,” and states that it is found in that part called the “os occipitis” where the “lambdoideae” and the “protuberantia occipitalis externa” adjoin. Gall remarks that on this point of the skull, not only in women but in the female of many animals, a very striking swelling is found (*New Theory* 85). From these findings Gall conjectures that

this part of the brain [is] the seat of some sort of sensibility which may be more peculiarly the attribute of the female; but afterwards, considering sensibility as a quality common to all organs, he was led to attribute to this conformation, a characteristic feature of the female sex, the love of their children (ibid.)

Gall's doctrine, Hufeland argues, points out how far it is limited by certain pre-determined tendencies to good or evil (*New Theory* 173). This view fixes the moral tendency of a person to the given body that would otherwise have been “improvable.” At Spandau, Gall is said to have examined the skull of a woman who had allegedly murdered her new born infant seven times successively, and in her he “found the organ [of parental and filial love] wanting” (*New Theory* 89). The materialist view that the propensity to kill one's own child is predetermined is “repulsive,” as Hufeland has said, but it is highly probable that this kind of materialism gave Shelley reason to believe certain things about the “female material mechanism.”

What is relevant here is the monster's justification for his conduct. He defends his position by relating his pitiable situation which has driven him to extreme misery, but it must be remembered that what provoked him to murder William was the knowledge that this boy whom he tried to befriend was Victor's brother. Then, his reason deserts him and the feeling of anger overcomes him. The monster is no less

wanting in “filial love” than Victor is lacking paternal love towards his creature.

Justine is a significant character: she is the victim of the same parental neglect, and yet develops both filial love towards her mother and maternal feeling as a surrogate parent. Justine’s mother “through a strange perversity” treated her ill, and this was the reason why Caroline invited her into her family in the first place.²⁸⁹ When her mother was at last repentant of her ill treatment, Justine is called back. Her mother’s repentance however was “vacillating,” and she often accused her of having caused the deaths of her brothers and sister (*Frankenstein* 47). Not only was she hated by her mother, but also misjudged and condemned by the court, and called a “monster” (*Frankenstein* 66). In that Justine is constantly misjudged like the monster, we could say she is his double.

Are bodily features and the underdeveloped organ the absolute fate for Shelley? To this question I will come back to the monster’s physical appearances. His form does not change from the beginning to the end, and this is confirmed by Walton’s description: “Never did I behold a vision so horrible as his face, of such loathsome, yet appalling hideousness” (*Frankenstein* 187). The spirit that was disembodied by Wollstonecraft in “The Cave of Fancy” is re-embodied by her daughter in the form of the monster. But that body not only repulses the perceiver, but also presents such ugliness that it becomes the obstacle to any kind of analysis. Therefore his narrative, which alone could compensate for his exterior form, is ineffectual. The representation of the monster is complicated by the multilayered narratives of Walton, Victor and the monster, and his loathsome appearance is stubbornly fixed, as if to defy Sagestus’s physiognomical analysis.

²⁸⁹ In the 1831 edition, it is explained that the reason why Justine’s mother treated her very ill is because she “could not endure her” (*Frankenstein* 1831, 63).

Wollstonecraft's progressive philosophy is projected onto Victor's distorted idealism, but it is understandably eclipsed by his failure to show parental love for his creature. The theme of maternal affection permeates the novel, and this was represented by the monster's double, Justine. The feminine characteristics are foregrounded, and this makes the deficiency of Victor and the monster remarkably conspicuous. The correct reading of the monster's character from the outward "signs" is not possible, for his body was completed before the character could be developed. Shelley has represented the monster not as a typical sample of a physiognomical study, but as the emblem of misreading. The only way to prevent the misreading of the monster is to deprive his viewer of sight, as in the case of the blind man. One is enabled to judge him justly when one perceives him only through his voice. Was it not the voice that was featured in the spiritual subject in 'The Cave of Fancy'? If the method of extracting the truth of the character is the disembodiment for Wollstonecraft, for Shelley it is perhaps to take away sight. The monster was confident that he could get his message across with his voice: "My *voice*, although harsh, had nothing terrible in it; I thought, therefore, that is, in the absence of his children, I could gain the good-will and mediation of the old De Lacy, I might by his means, be tolerated by my younger protectors" (*Frankenstein* 107).

What I have shown through the analysis of Shelley's monster is the importance of voices or narratives. Both Godwin and Wollstonecraft tried to show that truth stands on one's ability to communicate truth to the public. Three authors, however, shared certain insecurity about self-representation. As I have discussed in much detail in Chapter 1, this had much bearing upon eighteenth-century medical and philosophical discourses which inquired the body-mind relationship. The concept of passions and how

self is moulded was pivotal in asking moral questions, such as what evil is and how it arises. How self is perceived from outside was Shelley's another crucial theme. Shelley's *Frankenstein* does now allow its reader to make a simple judgement on whether or not the monster was "evil," because she casts doubt on the security of selfhood itself.

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