David M. Bussán (Jelly.London.com)

The Idea Incarnate

Kirsten A. Hall

The Greeks tell us that before the creation of man came the creation of the gods, and with them the birth of the mind and thought. As the story appears in Hesiod's *Theogony*, it had been prophesied to Zeus that he would beget a child more powerful and wiser than himself. Jealous of his sovereignty, Zeus swallowed his pregnant wife Metis—but to no avail: Zeus began to suffer a splitting headache, which was only relieved when Hephaestus, god of fire and metalworking, cleaved his forehead in half with an axe. From Zeus' mind sprang Athena fully formed, dressed in gleaming armor, heralding her arrival with a flourish of her javelin and a thunderous battle cry. The heavens and earth and the host of the immortals quaked in fear before her. But Athena lowered her weapon—and Zeus rejoiced at his good fortune.

The ancient Greeks loved to allegorize their own myths. One common interpretation of Athena's birth, according to Plato, Democritus, and the Stoic Chrysippus, was that Athena's leap from Zeus' head represented thought coming from the mind. Athena, we remember, was goddess not only of war but also of reason. If we extend the allegory, thought can be characterized as something powerful—so powerful that in spite of Zeus' attempt to destroy it, it bursts into the world as a flesh-and-blood reality and a potential threat. Perhaps the most dramatic moment is when Zeus, poised between fear and hope, recognizes the independent will of his own progeny. Will Athena lower her weapon or attack him? Our thoughts can take on lives of their own, and as such, it may be up to them to decide whether they will be our allies or our enemies. Luckily for Zeus, Athena comes in peace.

Like the myth of Athena's birth, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a story in which a godlike creator must reckon with the independence of his creation. But for Shelley's hero, the crisis tips in the other direction. Whereas Athena lowers her weapon before Zeus, Victor Frankenstein's creature "declare[s] everlasting war" against his maker. Shelley subtitled her novel *The Modern Prometheus*, but it could just as well be *The Modern Athena*. Like the Athena myth, *Frankenstein* probes the mysterious nature of ideas—their relationship to our minds, the forces that shape them, and how they come alive in the world.

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The Great Reversal

Victor Frankenstein tells us that he displayed the mind of a scientist from an early age. Unlike Elizabeth Lavenza—his childhood companion, cousin, and later bride—who delighted in "the aerial creations of the poets," Victor "delighted in investigating the facts relative to the actual world."* One day Victor stumbled across some outdated alchemy books, which spoke to his desire to understand the cosmos while also adding a new desire: to control the forces that govern the natural world and to create a new order. "What glory," Victor muses, "would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!"

Victor further pursues his scientific ambitions at the University of Ingolstadt in Germany, where his father encourages him to give up his alchemical dreams and take up modern natural philosophy instead. Skeptical at first and lamenting the good old days when scientists "sought immortality and power," Victor can't shake his visions of alchemical grandeur, on which his "interest in science was chiefly founded" and which he imagines modern chemistry lacks. All of this changes when Victor attends Professor Waldman's lecture, a paean to the limitless possibilities of modern science:

> The modern masters promise very little; they know that metals cannot be transmuted, and that the elixir of life is a chimera. But these philosophers, whose hands seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pore over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles. They penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places. They ascend into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows.

Modern science, not alchemy, is Victor's path to glory. Fired by Waldman's words, Victor relentlessly pursues his study of natural philosophy. He is especially ambitious to discover the secret "principle of life," the holy grail of science that had "ever been considered as a mystery." But what warms Victor's imagination is not just the prospect of pioneering uncharted scientific territory and being the first person to "bestow animation upon

* Unless otherwise noted, all references to the novel in this essay are to the original 1818 version, rather than the revised and more widely read 1831 version.

lifeless matter." His more fundamental motivation is domination and control over the physical world.

Frankenstein's first readers in 1818 would have immediately noticed two things: First, the author was anonymous. Second, whoever the author was, he or she had dedicated the novel to the celebrity writer and radical philosopher William Godwin. Today's readers of *Frankenstein* have the opposite experience: Mary Shelley is the household name while Godwin, her father, is virtually unknown. This shift makes it easy for us to miss how Shelley, in exploring the Athena problem, wrestles with her father's rationalist philosophy. A couple of chapters in, it would also have been obvious to the novel's early readers that its respectful inscriber actually had a bone or two to pick with Godwin's influential *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), in which he dreamed of man's greatest possible achievement: that "mind will one day become omnipotent over matter."

Godwin believed that social institutions such as government, private property, and marriage were forms of social and mental oppression that perpetuated ignorance and corruption. Propelled by the radical optimism of French Revolutionary politics, he became involved in the so-called "English Jacobin" circles—like-minded thinkers who met to discuss these ideas and who produced novels and treatises based on them. Godwin preached that truth would prevail and social evils would be remedied through the combined efforts of technological progress and the individual's private sense of morality.

But Godwin's project was more ambitious even than the aims of the revolutionaries. As political historian Mark Philp writes, "Godwin looked forward to a period in which the dominance of mind over matter would be so complete that mental perfectibility would take a physical form, allowing us to control illness and ageing and become immortal." Godwin asks:

> …if the power of intellect can be established over all other matter, are we not inevitably led to ask, why not over the matter of our own bodies? If over matter, at however great a distance, why not over matter which, ignorant as we may be of the tie that connects it with the thinking principle, we seem always to carry about with us, and which is our medium of communication with the external universe?

Godwin goes on to describe how our minds already exert power over our bodies: "We desire to stretch out our hand, and it is stretched out." Such motions are voluntary, while other processes, like the heart pumping blood and the body decaying as it ages, are involuntary. Back in the day when primitive man's intellectual powers were in their infancy, Godwin

conjectures, all bodily motions used to be involuntary. As human reason perfected itself over time, people gradually gained more voluntary control over their bodies. But why stop in our current state? Surely, there will come a time when reason will be able to command the body to stay young just as we can now blink an eye or walk across a room, leading to "a total extirpation of the infirmities of our nature."

Godwin was fascinated with the idea that we could progressively expand our voluntary control over our bodies because he believed it showed individual judgment to be the most promising avenue for social reform. If our ideas could control the material world in the same way we can use thought to move our arms, it may be possible to remove all limits to the mind's sovereignty, achieving a kind of rational omnipotence. There would be no saying what our minds could do with our ideas about morality and political action. We could solve world hunger with the snap of a finger, end social injustice just by thinking it. The idea may sound cartoonish—like Roald Dahl's Matilda terrorizing her tyrannical teacher by using telekinesis to levitate a piece of chalk and write on the board. But Godwin would doubtless have sneered at Matilda's pedestrian ambition.

Thus, Godwinian rational omnipotence over the material world begins with self-mastery. For Frankenstein, this self-mastery takes the form of asceticism—the surrender of his bodily pleasures and needs for the greater glory of scientific advancement. He is so "dedicated" to pursuing the secret of life that his "cheek had grown pale with study, and my person had become emaciated with confinement." Albeit in an extreme, unhealthy sense, Frankenstein brings his body under the yoke of his mind's ambition. Having conquered his own body, Victor seems to have cleared the path to achieving a universal version of Godwin's vision of bodily mastery: control over all corporeal systems, mastery over *the* human body.

At least, that is how it initially appears. Victor is the poster child for the Godwinian rationalist ideal, seeming to prove that it is possible for the human intellect to be perfected. Yet in Shelley's rendering, this perfection is most fully apparent in its ruin. After Victor finishes relating his story at the end of the novel, his rescuer Robert Walton laments the destruction of such a great mind:

> On every point of general literature he displays unbounded knowledge, and a quick and piercing apprehension.... What a glorious creature must he have been in the days of his prosperity, when he is thus noble and godlike in ruin. He seems to feel his own worth, and the greatness of his fall.

Frankenstein's fall is as glorious as the ruins of the Parthenon or a Mayan temple: How much more magnificent must he have been, Walton marvels, if even after his destruction he is "godlike" and "unbounded"?

Although Victor achieves what he sought to accomplish—bringing his idea to life—the result is not as he expected. Long before this moment, Victor gives the reader every reason to doubt that he is truly in control. His bodily asceticism, which amounts to wasting away, is at best an ironic form of self-mastery. Rather, it seems that the force of his idea overcomes and masters him. He describes his vision at one point as "a hurricane" and at another moment as a powerful "mountain river" sweeping his hopes away in a "torrent." And, because his "employment…had taken an irresistible hold of my imagination," he could not "tear" himself away. Shelley's 1831 revision makes his possession even more emphatic: "soon my mind was filled with one thought, one conception, one purpose." In another passage (returning again to the 1818 edition), he describes himself as "rather like one doomed by slavery to toil in the mines." Elsewhere, using a different image, he speaks of having been "animated by an almost supernatural enthusiasm."

This should give us pause: Isn't Victor the one who wants to "bestow animation"? Isn't he the one using his godlike, seemingly supernatural mind to manipulate the natural world according to his desires? The roles are unexpectedly reversed: The force of his idea animates him as if *it* were the brilliant scientist and Victor the previously lifeless corpse on the operating table.

This reversal suggests an ambiguous mastery. Who or what is in control at this point? Victor or his ideas? We find a clue to this question in a story Victor tells of his youth, when he witnessed a powerful thunderstorm:

> As I stood at the door, on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump. When we visited it the next morning, we found the tree shattered in a singular manner. It was not splintered by the shock, but entirely reduced to thin ribbands of wood. I never beheld any thing so utterly destroyed.
>
> The catastrophe of this tree excited my extreme astonishment; and I eagerly inquired of my father the nature and origin of thunder and lightning. He replied, "Electricity;" describing at the same time the various effects of that power. He constructed a small electrical machine, and exhibited a few experiments; he made also a kite, with a wire and string, which drew down that fluid from the clouds.

This omen, as we could call it, can be read in two different ways. The fifteen-year-old Victor, who had just started devouring books on alchemy, interprets this as a sign that nature can be vanquished. He is captivated by the possibility that he too could learn to subordinate nature—and immediately rushes off to his father, who directs his son to a machine that allows him to harness the power of lightning and to manipulate it at his will. The science of electricity, Victor realizes, can make a Zeus of us all.

The second way to interpret this sign, and the reading that Victor continually favors as the novel progresses, is that he, not nature, is the "blasted stump." "I am a blasted tree; the bolt has entered my soul," Victor muses—blasted by his own ideas, his own ambitions, and the assumption that he could become omnipotent over matter without recognizing the possibility that matter would become omnipotent over him.

But it is not until that fateful, "dreary night of November" that this realization begins to dawn on Victor. Ironically, it is precisely at the moment when Victor comes closest to realizing Godwin's ideal that it becomes clear that he has failed. With only a few critical differences, the creature's first stirrings of life echo the myth of Athena's birth. Just as Zeus has an epiphany about Athena's independence, so too does Victor realize his ultimate lack of control over his creature—both over how the creature appears and over how the creature acts.

As soon as Victor successfully manages to "infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing" at his feet, and sees the "dull yellow eye of the creature open," he rushes out of the room. But Victor doesn't run because his creature has exhibited violent or malevolent behavior—as Athena's armor and war cry are plainly threatening. Instead, Victor explains that his flight owes to visceral disgust at his creation's hideous appearance—or, rather, his *unexpectedly* hideous appearance:

> His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. 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 a 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.

Victor's response is as much disgust as it is surprise. Surprise arises when the reality of something is different from our expectations; it means we are not fully masters of the outcomes we wish to see, that our minds do not have total control over the external world. Surprise, in other words,

has no room in Godwin's or Victor's world of mental mastery. What Victor seems to fear is less the creature itself than his own lack of control.

This suspicion is confirmed when Victor then falls asleep, dreams about Elizabeth's death, and is awakened by the creature uttering "some inarticulate sounds" with a hand "stretched out" toward him. Again, Victor flees in terror. This time, it is the creature's extended arm that is particularly horrific to Victor. It is also the memory of this gesture that sends him into hysterics when his best friend, Henry Clerval, comes to the university the following morning to pay him a visit: "I imagined that the monster seized me; I struggled furiously, and fell down in a fit."

The image of the creature's arm stretching out towards his creator—in addition to alluding ironically to Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*—evokes both Athena lifting her javelin toward Zeus and Godwin's example of how the mind controls the body: "We desire to stretch out our hand, and it is stretched out." Victor, of course, is far from godlike in either Godwin's or Michelangelo's sense. Instead, he more resembles Zeus suspended in the fear of uncertainty: Will the creature strangle or embrace him? It is especially significant that for Godwin the extended arm had become an emblem of power that represented human reason's sovereignty over the material world. At the exact moment of Victor's defeat, the novel also reminds us of what could have been, according to Godwin's philosophy and Victor's own dream, his greatest triumph.

The Origin of an Idea

What, then, do we make of Shelley's apparent preoccupation with her father's ideas? These questions—about the nature of our thoughts and about the mind's relationship to the material world—were not just abstract intellectual interests of Shelley's but cut to the quick of some of the most important relationships in her life.

Romanticism scholar Maurice Hindle, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, provides some invaluable insights into Mary's intellectual life. The Athena problem—of how thought can come alive and threaten us—was in the air she breathed and the blood that ran through her veins.

Shelley was the daughter of not one but two English radical thinkers. Though Mary Wollstonecraft died only days after giving birth to her, Shelley was highly aware of her own origins: "It is not singular that, as the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity, I should very early in life have thought of writing." When Mary was a

child, Godwin wrote about bringing her up "like a philosopher," and she remembered later that "to be something great and good was the precept given me by my Father." Knowing Godwin's philosophy, it is not difficult to imagine the type of greatness he encouraged in his daughter. Indeed, he was most thrilled to observe that his daughter's "desire of knowledge is great" and "her perseverance in everything she undertakes almost invincible."

When Mary wasn't writing or reading, she was surrounded by London's literati at her father's home, absorbing the conversations and ideas of everyone from essayists like William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb to the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the chemist Humphry Davy. The most exciting and revolutionary ideas of the Romantics swirled around her in her upbringing.

The young Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was ambivalent about her father's ideas. She both idolized him—"Until I met Shelley I could justly say that he [Godwin] was my God"—and resisted his revolutionary politics. Mary writes that she was drawn to the same qualities of her father that she later saw reflected in her future husband Percy. Next to Godwin, Percy would become Mary's most important relationship and intellectual influence. Percy himself was drawn passionately to Godwin's political ideas and, together with his then-wife Harriet, began to pay Godwin visits at his home. His wife soon effectively forgotten, Percy's visits became even more frequent and his attraction to Mary more obvious. Their blossoming romance resulted only a few months later in declarations of love and an elopement to the Continent in July 1814.

Two years later, during her and Percy's voyage to Geneva, the questions that had formed her since childhood and been at least partly responsible for bringing her and Percy together reached a boiling point and culminated in the penning of *Frankenstein*. During this unusually rainy summer of 1816, Mary, Percy, and their party of friends—which included the infamous poet Lord Byron, Byron's physician Polidori, and Mary's stepsister Claire Clairmont—often sought refuge indoors, where their conversations turned to abstruse philosophical and scientific topics. The thick air described by Polidori in his diary suggests the intellectual intensity of these conversations: The group "talked, till the ladies' brains whizzed with giddiness, about idealism." Lord Byron describes a similar fervor in a letter he wrote six months later to a friend: "I was half mad…between metaphysics, mountains, lakes, love unextinguishable, thoughts unalterable and the nightmare of my own delinquencies."

Perhaps inspired by these electrifying conversations about the nature of the mind and its ideas, Mary devoured a number of texts during the year she was writing *Frankenstein*, prominent among them John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), which was one of the most influential works on the mind to eighteenth-century readers. Locke had argued that all of our ideas come to us through sensation and perception of the external world—an intriguing contrast to Godwin's kind of rationalism, which suggested a more primary and active role for ideas. How can humans use reason to control the world outside our heads if we actually must rely on the external world for our ideas?

Already, it would seem that Shelley was not entirely convinced by her father's belief in the power of human reason. If Shelley's reading is any indication and if what Byron and Polidori say is true, *Frankenstein* came out of a time of heightened awareness about questions that had lingered with Shelley since her childhood. Where do our ideas, Shelley asks, come from? Do we control them? Or do they control us? If they come to us from the external world, how much power over them do we really have? The prominence of such questions did not escape the notice of the novelist Sir Walter Scott, who perceptively pointed out in his review of *Frankenstein* shortly after it was published that the novel wasn't frivolously depicting the fantastic for its own sake but was a way to explore "the powers and workings of the human mind."

Evidently, Percy Shelley was tormented by the same questions as Mary. As noted, Percy was also deeply influenced by Godwin's philosophy. He shared with Godwin the same faith in the power of the human imagination and mind to effect social change. Like many of the Romantics, Percy was optimistic that the mind was capable of almost limitless possibilities and aspirations. Percy, however, was far less certain than Godwin about just how much control humans have over their own minds and over the effect of their ideas on the world. This conflict is ubiquitous in his poetry. In the last lines of his famous poem "Ode to the West Wind" (1819), Percy describes how just as the West Wind stirs the dead leaves on the ground, so does he hope that it—or the "Wild Spirit"—will also inspire his mind and soul:

> Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
> Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
> And, by the incantation of this verse,
>
> Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
> Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
> Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

> The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
> If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

The poet speaks words that can change the world, but not without outside inspiration. Until then, his thoughts are dead and need to be stirred to life by a force he describes earlier in the poem as "uncontrollable."

In another poem, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," which Percy composed during the first summer he and Mary spent together on the Continent, he writes about an ambiguous "Spirit of Beauty" that strongly invokes Plato's theory of forms, a concept which had long fascinated him. Instead of celebrating how nature lifts up his spirit and ennobles his mind, this poem laments how we have no control over when we are inspired. This spirit floats through the world on "inconstant wing," visiting "each human heart and countenance" with "inconstant glance":

> Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,
> This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?

Percy mourns that we cannot control our own greatness, that sometimes we are called to noble words and deeds and other times abandoned to intellectual impotence.

Like her husband, and like most artists, Mary Shelley was no stranger to the fickleness of ideas. She describes the origin of *Frankenstein* in the introduction to her 1831 revision of the book. Lord Byron, she tells us, had proposed during their rainy days indoors that they each write a ghost story. Shelley recalls how she "thought and pondered—vainly. I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations."

Days passed, and following the group's fascinating conversations about metaphysics, epistemology, idealism, and how to discover the principle of life, Mary was completely enthralled. "My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me" as she saw in her mind's eye the vision of a pale student galvanizing a corpse back into life. Twice she emphasizes how the idea had come to captivate her, in much the same way she describes Victor's inspiration: "The idea so possessed my mind, that a thrill of fear ran through me" and "Swift as light and as cheering was the idea that broke in upon me."

The phrase "broke in upon" offers a forceful version of the theory that the origin of ideas is not intrinsic but extrinsic to our minds. Mary and Percy recognized that inspiration or ideas come to us—whether from a Platonic realm hinted at in Shelley's poem or in the perceptual, empirical

Lockean sense that Mary had read about—and impose themselves on our minds at their own pleasure, regardless of our preferences and convenience.

When Thoughts Make History

Every once in a while, we hear a story on the news about some hapless suburbanite who thought it would be possible to domesticate a tiger or a python. It's also a favorite theme of movies, from the ominous warning of *Jurassic Park* to Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant's comic attempts to wrangle an escaped pet leopard in *Bringing Up Baby*. Ideas too have a life of their own: They may need coaxing, but they will also come without our bidding. They are often more powerful than we expect. As we have seen, both Mary and Percy Shelley were skeptical of Godwin's optimism about the eventual sovereignty of human reason over the external world, suspecting that such a belief would lead instead to the mind being overwhelmed by the strength of its own ideas, like a wild cat turning on its owner's attempt to tame it.

In the first half of the novel, Shelley casts doubt on whether we are in control of our ideas. The second half, which depicts the aftermath of Victor setting his creature loose in the world, poses this question: What if the human mind were actually as powerful as the rationalists believe?

Through Victor's dealings with a creature he made but whose independence frustrates him at every turn, the novel carries out Godwinian rationalism and Romantic idealism even more faithfully than they do. It's an ironic twist on the revolutionary theories of Shelley's day: Godwin and the Romantics want to see their brilliant, earth-shaking ideas manifest in the world for political and social good—but as Shelley suggests in her novel, ideas will rarely exist in the world exactly as we anticipate, especially when they are as powerful as we want them to be. Godwin gets what he wishes, but it is not what he expects. Part of what *Frankenstein* is about is how rationalists and Romantics, ironically, do not understand the full force of their own ideas, even when this very understanding is what they claim is the key to liberation and happiness.

As the Athena myth suggests, ideas, especially our most interesting ones, are rarely content resting unexpressed in our minds. It is in their nature to strive toward their own fulfillment and expression in the world. No matter how hard Zeus tried, there was little he could do to stop Athena's birth. Likewise, Victor was so consumed by the thought of creating life that the idea took on a life of its own. And when he succeeds—when the creature's limbs convulse and his eyes open—the power of the

idea, so very different in its reality than in its ideality, is as terrifying and startling as Athena armed for battle.

But the terror that comes from seeing our ideas come to life in the world is one that the novel recognizes as the story of history. Think of the difference between Luther listing the Ninety-five Theses and the ensuing centuries of religious conflict; between the French Revolution's ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity" and blood flowing through the streets during the Reign of Terror; between the abstract "what if" of splitting the atom and the reality of the first mushroom cloud rising. Even Godwin himself found too much friction between his theories and his lived life: Though he opposed the institution of marriage, he married the pregnant Mary Wollstonecraft because he had "no right to injure" her happiness, and he was outraged when his daughter became romantically involved with a married man. And when it came to Mary's education, Godwin had to admit that philosophy had not prepared him for fatherhood: "The scepticism which perhaps sometimes leads me right in matters of speculation, is torment to me when I would attempt to direct the infant mind."

Likewise, Victor has to cope with the tangible reality of his idea out in the world: His creature not only proves to be much uglier than he expected, but also defies Victor's authority with his rival intellect and superior physical strength. One of the ways Shelley emphasizes the creature's independence from Victor is by allowing the creature to narrate his own perspective (the novel includes an extended monologue from the creature, relayed by Victor to Robert Walton, the book's actual narrator). Fittingly, a large part of the creature's story focuses on his education, a strange but almost miraculous account of how something that was once just an idea in someone's mind now develops a mind and ideas of its own.

The more we hear about the creature's education, the more struck we are with the realization that he has developed a clearer understanding of the human mind than has Victor himself. After Victor has abandoned the creature to his own devices, the creature takes responsibility for his own intellectual formation. The three books he studies are Plutarch's *Lives*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*:

> These wonderful narrations inspired me with strange feelings. Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle, and at another as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike.… For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow, or even why there were laws and governments; but

> when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased, and I turned away with disgust and loathing.

As we will recall, Victor's own formative reading in alchemy and natural history only tell him about man's godlike potential. But the creature's reading has led him to conclude that man is at once godlike and beast-like, equally capable of greatness and baseness. It is for this reason that when the creature finally confronts Victor, the creature can understand himself as simultaneously slave and master. The creature can call Victor his "slave" because he knows he is master enough to demand that Victor create a companion for him. Yet he is equally indebted to Victor for his existence and recognizes that his longings for companionship and happiness are beyond his control and can only be fulfilled by Victor.

While Victor and his creature are uncannily alike in many ways—they are both alarmingly intelligent, persuasive, and single-minded in their pursuits—their most crucial difference is that the creature never once entertains the possibility of following in Victor's footsteps and creating his own companion. Perhaps this can be attributed to their radically different views of human nature. If, like Victor, we believe in man's divinity, then it is perfectly reasonable to see ourselves as masters over creation. But if we are like the creature, we are haunted by the paradox that is at the heart of the Athena problem: We possess the godlike longing for control, but know that our animal frailty makes control almost impossible. The creature's awareness of this conundrum aligns him more closely with his true creator, Mary Shelley, than with his fictional one.

Thus, these two understandings of man's nature lead Victor and his creature to different types of anguish. For the creature it is the anguish of impotence, for Victor the anguish of failure. It's unclear whether Victor ever comes to understand why his experiment failed, or asks why he becomes slave to his ideas at the exact moment he expects to become their master.

On one hand it would seem that Victor does understand. Even though the creature assures him that the only outcome of Victor creating a companion would be "peaceful and human," Victor now knows to think more carefully about potential consequences before executing his plan. He is neither optimistic about the intrinsic goodness that would come from the work of his hands nor presumes to have any supernatural foresight about the outcome of his actions. After all, the creature didn't turn out as he hoped, so why would a female companion turn out exactly as the creature anticipates?

On the other hand, we should carefully consider the advice the dying Victor gives to Robert Walton, another scientist who has just embarked to the North Pole on a similar quest for knowledge and glory: "Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed." Victor's language is ambiguous. It seems he is urging Walton to give up scientific ambition. Perhaps he remembers the "blasted" tree stump and his disastrous assumption that it would be nature, not he, who would be destroyed. But just pages before, he was exhorting Walton and his crew to persevere in their journey north in spite of dangerous, icy conditions to prove their "heroism": "Be steady to your purposes, and firm as a rock." To Victor, the human spirit still could be more powerful than the frozen waters of the Arctic or the laws of electricity.

Victor's apparently contradictory advice to Walton becomes clearer when we consider a passage earlier in the book. Again, Victor speculates as to why he "should not be altogether free from blame":

> A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule were always observed; if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Cæsar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed.

Here, Victor misplaces his sense of failure. His goal, as he now makes more explicit than he had at any other point in the novel, is to achieve the mental infallibility that Godwin thought possible—to become, as Victor puts it here, "a human being in perfection." He believes he has failed to achieve that ideal but doesn't recognize that the ideal was misguided from the first—that it was really Godwin's theory about the perfectibility of man that had failed him. If only he had been more in control, Victor imagines. If only he hadn't allowed his ideas to get the better of him.

The last part of Victor's reflections—on how the course of history would have been less violent had men preserved their more tranquil

affections—should remind us of the creature's own musings about the course of human history. Here again, the juxtaposition of their two views is telling. For the creature, history's catalogue of "vice and bloodshed" points to an inevitability about the human condition. As *Paradise Lost* had taught him, man had fallen into degradation and vice precisely because in his pride he had tried to become like God. Victor, on the other hand, reads history as a series of stories about people who fell just short of the ambition and perfection they were striving for. Just because Caesar failed, just because the Spanish explorers failed, doesn't mean that it would have been impossible to succeed. And even though Victor has joined the ranks of those who failed in so grandiose a manner, there is no reason why Walton can't fly in the face of history and triumph at last.

Ideas in the Flesh

Mary Shelley once referred to her and Percy's elopement to the Continent as "an incarnate romance." There is a way in which the same thing can be said of her novel, not in the sense of living something that one only reads about in novels but in the sense that this is a romance about the incarnate. It's a novel about how the things we usually assign to the immaterial or spiritual world—hopes, dreams, abstract speculations, and other "Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break / On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring," to borrow from Coleridge—transform into flesh and blood, taking on thoughts and wills of their own.

But while we might entertain monstrous thoughts from time to time, our musings do not usually emerge gnashing their teeth, scaling mountains, and swearing vengeance upon everything we hold dear. But what if they did? What if every thought, sacred or profane, could materialize unbidden from the shadow realm and walk down the street to greet us? Would this change how, and what, we think? Make us more willing to theorize or entertain certain ideas rather than others?

This is the startling universe that Shelley's novel challenges its readers to imagine—a world in which our thoughts quite literally come to life. There is a reason why classical theologians considered curiosity to be a vice. But curiosity doesn't always strike us as dangerous. After all, it's easy to be wanton in our thoughts, like Victor, when they exist only in the abstract. The consequences of our thoughts may seem as flimsy as they are intangible, as easily dismissed as bubbles burst on a spring—or at least as weak relative to the control of our more powerful minds.

The novel challenges this cavalier presumption, bringing the force and the independent reality of our ideas before our eyes with visceral urgency. We doubt even what little remains of Victor's optimism at the end of the book, or that if Victor had somehow decided to suppress his thought of creating life he would have been able to change the ultimate course of events. Indeed, readers and Shelley scholars alike have noticed that the 1831 revision deals much more directly with themes of fate than does the original 1818 text. It's as if the longer Shelley thought about the problem her novel explores, the more it seemed that Victor's fall was in some sense inevitable.

The world of *Frankenstein* feels like one created by a woman who had lived with the Athena problem long enough to know there was no simple answer she could provide in any novel. The story cannot be reduced to its standard reading, a cautionary tale of the hubris of the scientist gone horribly awry. We are left instead with a conundrum, a tragic sense in which we are driven irresistibly by our ideas to become as gods, yet become instead their slaves, not the possessors but the possessed.