Metaphysical Intersections in *Frankenstein*:  
Mary Shelley’s Theistic Investigation of Scientific Materialism and Transgressive Autonomy

David S. Hogsette

Abstract: *Frankenstein* is a speculative narrative that asks: what would happen if man created human life without the biologically and relationally necessary woman and with indifference to God? What if Adam were to reject his own Creator and create life after his own fleshly or material image? Mary Shelley’s answer to these questions is not a triumphant humanist manifesto, nor is it an ironic subversion of a supposedly outmoded theistic perspective. Rather, she offers a philosophical nightmare revealing the horrific consequences of methodological naturalism taken to its logical conclusion. *Frankenstein* explores the ideological vacuum engendered by scientific materialism and examines the spiritual bankruptcy of replacing theism with secular humanism. Victor Frankenstein’s transgressive autonomy, grounded in scientific materialism, results in a reductionism that ultimately leads to existential despair, individual crisis, and communal disintegration.

It is in vain, O men, that you seek within yourselves the remedy for your ills. All your light can only reach the knowledge that not in yourselves will you find truth or good. The philosophers have promised you that, and have been unable to do it. They neither know what is your true good, nor what is your true state. How could they have given remedies for your ills, when they did not even know them? Your chief maladies are pride, which takes you away from God, and lust, which binds you to earth; and they have done nothing else but cherish one or other of these diseases. If they gave you God as an end, it was only to administer to your pride; they made
when Mary Shelley breathed literary life into her “hideous progeny” and bid it “go forth and prosper” (Butler 197), I wonder if she had any idea that it would be so culturally significant over 175 years later. I think she would be fascinated by its lingering, almost ghoulish literary and allegorical tenacity. Her creature simply will not die. On one hand, this means her work is still teaching us something about ourselves and the contemporary world in which we live. As Alan Rauch notes, “The novel is arguably one of the most influential works in the conceptual practice of science and technology and Mary Shelley one of the most influential thinkers” (96). On the other hand, the persistence of *Frankenstein* is somewhat disquieting, since it ultimately means that we have heard her message but have not fully heeded its prescient and relevant warnings. As Mary Shelley’s imaginative vision continues to enthral readers, critics speculate as to why her nightmare still engages our scientifically advanced and persistently cynical age. George Levine suggests that the novel’s contemporary relevance “lies in its transformation of fantasy and traditional Christian and pagan myths into unremitting secularity, into the myth of mankind as it must work within the limits of the visible, physical world” (6-7). Levine believes that the novel portrays theistic worldviews as empty fantasies that are longed for yet repeatedly and ruthlessly debunked by a relentless materialistic reality. Paul Cantor takes a similar approach to the novel, arguing that Mary Shelley adopts Gnostic creation mythology in order to revise the conservative Christian worldview and to express a humanistic self-liberation: “Man need no longer be in awe of his creator; he need no longer even feel grateful for being created. He can turn his back on God with a good conscience and set about charting his own course, seeking out ways to remake an imperfectly created world, even to change his own nature for the better” (xiii-xiv). Other critics, like Naomi Hetherington, David Soyka, and Anne Mellor, build upon the foundational work of Leslie Tannenbaum’s detailed analysis of Miltonic tropes within *Frankenstein*, yet they draw radically different conclusions, suggesting that the novel’s contemporary relevance stems in part from Mary Shelley’s radical appropriation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and her transgressive subversion of the biblical account of God and His creation.
Mary Shelley's novel clearly engages the question of origins from scientific and theistic perspectives, but it does not embrace secular humanism nor celebrate a subversion of theistic creation in favor of scientific materialism. On the contrary, this novel grips our imaginations today precisely because the ultimate transgressive horrors of which it speaks pertain particularly to our scientifically advanced culture. Scientists now hold knowledge that may allow them to do much of what Mary Shelley only dreamed of through Victor's character. In other words, *Frankenstein* may no longer be merely a vicarious thrill; it has become, instead, a terrifying mirror reflecting a horrific reality we are unprepared to accept. This novel is a speculative narrative that asks: what would happen if man created human life without the biologically and relationally necessary woman and with indifference to God? What if Adam were to reject his own Creator and create life after his own fleshly or material image? Mary Shelley's answer to these questions is not a triumphant humanist manifesto, nor is it an ironic subversion of a supposedly outmoded theistic perspective. Rather, it is a philosophical nightmare revealing the horrific consequences of methodological naturalism taken to its logical conclusion. *Frankenstein* explores the ideological vacuum engendered by scientific materialism and examines the spiritual bankruptcy of replacing theism with secular humanism. Victor Frankenstein's transgressive autonomy, grounded in scientific materialism, results in a reductionism that ultimately leads to existential despair, individual crisis, and communal disintegration.

Mary Shelley's philosophical position hinges upon a categorical distinction between God as an infinite Creator and necessary Being and the human being as a finite creature. In her introduction to the 1831 text, Mary Shelley articulates this distinction in her description of creativity: “Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being substance itself” (Butler 195). In her view, humans can only invent by using materials drawn from a preexisting, created universe. God, on the other hand, creates from void or *ex nihilo*. Out of nothingness God creates the raw materials from which all other things are created. Although it is difficult to ascertain Mary Shelley's precise theology of creation, she clearly viewed the seen and unseen universe, the here and the hereafter, the physical and the metaphysical as substantive realities divinely created by God. She did not consider them to be eternally present things. Reflecting upon her feelings
and views on death, she wrote the following journal entry dated October 5, 1839:

I had opportunity to look at Death in the face, and did not fear it—far from it. My feeling, especially in the first and most perilous instance, was, I go to no new creation, I enter under no new laws. The God that made this beautiful world (and I was then at Lerici, surrounded by the most beautiful manifestation of the visible creation) made that into which I go; as there is beauty and love here, such is there, and I felt as if my spirit would when it left my frame be received and sustained by a beneficent and gentle Power. (Jones 208)

According to Mary Shelley, God is “a beneficent and gentle Power,” a necessary creative Being who is the cause of earthly and heavenly existence and, as such, whose creative power is vastly different than that of humans who are themselves God's creation. Through this distinction between limited human or creaturely invention and the unlimited creative acts of the Creator God, Mary Shelley contrasts what she considers to be her own humble act of novelistic invention with the transgressive invention of Victor, which he considers in his own arrogant imagination to be somehow authentically creative in nature. Victor is not a humble inventor who shows respect for himself, his invention, or the Creator; rather, he is a presumptuous man who attempts to transcend invention and to create life as if he were God. He reduces true creation to materialistic invention, and he remains a finite materialist in a state of denial, inventing by assembling preexisting materials into a hideous frame fashioned after his own filthy image, constructing his own “hideous progeny” that he is unprepared to accept, nurture, or redeem.

Mary Shelley's critique of materialism is rooted in her own understanding of natural philosophy and the metaphysical debates surrounding the scientific developments of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. She wrote her novel during a time when Europe was experiencing social change, economic transformation, and scientific debate. People increasingly looked to science (natural philosophy) to answer questions about life and nature, expecting scientists to articulate a consistent worldview that would help people understand the vast world around them and their complicated place in it. As Alan Richardson so clearly reveals throughout *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (2001), these debates and expectations of science were in no way lost on the Romantic-period writers; in fact, their thinking and writing about art, poetry, and the imagination
were greatly influenced by developments in chemistry, biology, anatomy, and neuroscience. One particular scientific debate raging during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries occurred between the vitalists and the materialists, and many of the writings and lectures generated by this debate influenced Mary Shelley's philosophy of science and shaped her composition of *Frankenstein*.

As early as 1793 with John Thelwall's controversial lecture series on the nature and organization of life at Guy Hospital, emerging materialistic perspectives on the science of life began to challenge the vitalist understanding of mind-body dualism. The vitalists held that life had its own force or metaphysical principle that was separate in nature and distinct in substance from anatomical structure. Thelwall advanced the materialist claim that life emerges spontaneously from nonliving material due to particular arrangements of inert matter (Roe, Introduction 1-4). Lectures, debates, and discussion on both the academic and popular levels continued over the next few decades, leading up to the highly controversial materialism-vitalism debates from 1814 to 1818 between John Abernathy and William Lawrence. Abernathy was a well-known English surgeon and proponent of mind-body dualism, and Lawrence was his controversial student who advocated an antitheistic materialism and mechanistic view of life similar to that espoused by Thelwall. Lawrence vehemently denied any metaphysical reality and considered life to be nothing but the necessary consequence of an organized assemblage of parts, fitting together in just such a way that it somehow automatically became an animated being. Lawrence characterized life as the mere epiphenomena of mechanistic order, and he viewed the mind or consciousness as nothing but the result of secretions within the material brain (De Almeida 100-101).

Because scientific materialism considers an effect to be its own cause and attempts to reduce the complex metaphysical realities of life to mere physical constructs and glandular functions, it was rejected by such intellectuals as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Humphry Davy, whose cogent objections greatly influenced the thinking of William Godwin and that of his bright young daughter Mary Shelley. As Maurice Hindle notes, Coleridge's theological views and Davy's scientific theories encouraged both Godwin and Mary Shelley to adopt theism and to subscribe to a science of life informed by vitalism (31-34). Davy, a prominent natural philosopher and chemist, was a friend of Coleridge, and both visited Godwin and his family frequently between 1799 and 1800. Davy was a vitalist who argued
that the force of life was related to electricity, which he also believed was the underlying force of chemistry. Davy’s scientific discussions with Godwin greatly enhanced Mary Shelley’s knowledge of chemistry and sharpened her understanding of vitalism as a compelling science of life. Moreover, it is very likely that she witnessed some of Davy’s spectacular chemistry lectures and demonstrations, which deepened her knowledge of vitalism and possibly even served as the source for the scene in the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein* in which Victor’s father encourages him to attend a lecture series on chemistry (Robinson, *Frankenstein* 66). Finally, we know from her journals that she read Davy’s lectures published in 1812 titled *Elements of Chemical Philosophy* (Jones 67-68, 73). Davy’s intellectual influence encouraged Mary Shelley’s interest in a morally responsible science and strengthened her belief in vitalism.

In addition to Davy’s scientific influence, Coleridge provided a theological and poetic foundation for Mary Shelley’s theistic and vitalistic worldview. She read and studied his poetry, lectures, and sermons, and was particularly struck by his aesthetic and intellectual brilliance during his visits in the Godwin home. A striking influence upon her intellectual growth was Coleridge’s ability to persuade her father to reject atheism and to accept a form of theism. Coleridge’s theological conversion of Godwin was no small feat. As a young dissenting preacher and theologian, Godwin initially held to the main tenets of Calvinism. However, upon reading Baron d’Holbach’s *System de la Nature* (1770) in 1782, Godwin rejected Calvinism and became a deist. In 1783, he studied Dr. Joseph Priestley’s *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion* (1782) and consequently rejected Trinitarian orthodoxy and became a Socinianist. As his faith in Christian theism continued to decline, Godwin began corresponding with Priestley in 1785, and by 1787 his faith had diminished to the point that he considered himself an atheistic unbeliever (Smith and Smith 56-57). However, through his friendship with Coleridge, Godwin continued his theological exploration and spiritual journey, and in 1800 he renounced his atheism and embraced a vaguely defined theism. In an undated journal entry, Godwin writes,

> My theism, if such I may be permitted to call it, consists in a reverent and soothing contemplation of all that is beautiful, grand, or mysterious in the system of the universe, and in a certain conscious intercourse and correspondence with the principles of these attributes, without attempting the idle task of developing and defining it—into this train of thinking I was first led by conversations of S. T. Coleridge. (Paul 2:357)
Coleridge's theological influence upon Godwin directly impacted Mary Shelley's intellectual and aesthetic development. She was present at many of Coleridge's visits, listening to and engaging in the theological debates and philosophical discussions between these profound thinkers. That Godwin eventually became a theist certainly strengthened Mary Shelley's confidence in the intellectual validity of this worldview. In addition to influencing her through interactions with Godwin, Coleridge's intellectual and aesthetic perspectives directly challenged and shaped her philosophical and literary development. In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Frankenstein," Beth Lau notes that "Coleridge was a profoundly sympathetic and congenial figure to Mary Shelley, and his ideas and literary themes resonated with and helped her shape her own" (209). Mary Shelley discovered many of Coleridge's literary themes from his lecture series on Shakespeare and Milton delivered between 1811 and 1812. She likely heard the lectures summarized by her father and family friend Henry Crabb Robinson who both regularly attended, and she also probably read summaries of the lectures in various newspapers (Lau 212-13). Moreover, as Lau's careful analysis reveals, the close thematic parallels between The Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Frankenstein clearly demonstrate the significant influence Coleridge had on Mary Shelley's development as a thinker and writer. Coleridge and Davy were certainly instrumental in shaping Godwin's and Mary Shelley's views on theology and its relationship to the sciences of life, and the integration of these intellectual perspectives directly influenced Mary Shelley's process of writing and revising Frankenstein.

Mary Shelley did not write extensively or explicitly about her theological positions. However, she was a theistic vitalist (one who believed in the existence of a created animating spirit or immaterial soul that is different in nature from the material body yet related to it), as evidenced by a cumulative consideration of various journal entries. As already noted, she believed in the existence of a beneficent Power, a loving God who created the physical and the metaphysical world. Not only did she believe in a creator God, but she also believed in his providential power over his created universe, even as she struggled with the implications of such a view. For example, after reading Dante in 1822 she muses, "They say that Providence is shown by the extraction that may be ever made of good from evil, that we draw our virtues from our faults. So I am to thank God for making me weak. I might say, 'Thy will be done,' but I cannot applaud the permitter of self-degradation, though dignity and superior wisdom arise from bitter and
burning ashes" (Jones 168). In mulling over what is apparently a Reformed or Calvinist treatment of the problem of evil from the perspective of Providential redemptions of evil in this world (permitting evil to exist and bringing ultimate good from it), Mary Shelley does not reject or deny God's providential workings in this world; rather, she draws the line at permissive self-degradation. Most telling is that after a series of tragic losses in her life, including the most devastating loss of them all, the death of her beloved Percy, she does not abandon her belief in theistic Providence. Writing in October 1822, she notes, as a simple matter of fact, that through her earlier losses, “the Power that rules human affairs had determined, in spite of Nature, that it [Percy and his voice of encouragement and inspiration] should endure” (Jones 183). She notes that God allowed Percy to be a “bank of refuge” (Jones 183) to comfort her through her children's deaths. Then, she simply writes, “But that is gone. His voice can no longer be heard; the earth no longer receives the shadow of his form” (Jones 183). She accepts this tragic turn of events as part of a providentially ordered existence and ends the entry with this resignation: “Well, I close my book. To-morrow I must begin this new life of mine” (Jones 183). She begins the arduous task of starting over and trying to discover the good that will eventually come from the evil of Percy’s death. In December of 1822 she takes comfort in her theistic view of an afterlife: “I trust in a hereafter—I have ever done so. I know that it shall be mine—even with thee, glorious spirit! Who surely lookest on, pitieest, and loveth thy Mary” (Jones 186). Over a decade later, reflecting upon some of the criticisms she had received regarding her views and writings, she again acknowledges God’s providential will over her life and that because of Providence there is significance and meaning in the trials of life: “...as I grow older I grow more fearless for myself—I become firmer in my opinions. The experienced, the suffering, the thoughtful may at least speak unrebuked. If it be the will of God that I live, I may ally my name yet to ‘the good cause,’ though I do not expect to please my accusers” (Jones 206). The main point of considering these various journal entries is that Mary Shelley recognized and held to a theistic understanding of life's tragic turns, and took what comfort she could in a faith of the divine order of life that culminates in spiritual reunions.

In addition to believing in a creator God who works providentially in the lives of his creations, Mary Shelley also believed in the existence of immaterial reality and spiritual entities. As Percy Shelley noted in an entry in Mary Shelley’s journal, this belief in ghosts and spirits necessitates a belief
in God: “We talk of Ghosts; neither Lord Byron nor Monk G. Lewis seem to believe in them; and they both agree, in the very face of reason, that none could believe in ghosts without also believing in God” (Jones 57). In other words, Mary Shelley’s vitalistic views are directly related to and informed by her theistic beliefs. Her vitalism, or at least an unconscious desire for vitalism to be true and experientially relevant, is glimpsed in a desperate dream after the death of her first child, a dream that uncannily anticipates *Frankenstein*. On March 19, 1815, she writes in her journal, “Dream that my little baby came to life again; that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived. Awake and find no baby” (Jones 41). Dreams often reveal our deepest desires and hopes, shunning the pure logic of reason, yet dreams also draw from what we already know, believe, or hope to be true. The mechanism by which the baby is revived in this dream reflects a crude form of vitalism: the baby’s body is cold and merely needs warmth to revitalize the living spirit trapped within. Of course, this dream is pure fantasy and speaks of the desperate emotional and psychological pain Mary Shelley experienced due to the death of her baby; however, the dream builds upon a belief system already in place within the logic of her mind, that the human organism is more than mere molecules in motion and is animated by a non-physical nature.

Mary Shelley’s belief in and fascination with the immaterial nature of life, a core tenet of vitalism, are further revealed in her passion for the ghost tale. On October 20, 1818, Chevalier Mengaldo retells several ghost stories at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Hoppner. Mary Shelley’s journal is characterized, typically, by short entries; she wrote long entries on the issues, themes, and concerns she cared about deeply, like the death of Percy Shelley that she, arguably, never reconciled in her own heart and mind. It is significant to note that her October 20, 1818 entry records in vivid detail three of the ghost stories told by Mengaldo (Feldman and Scott-Kilvert 230-33). Why does she choose to record these three stories in which the dead revisit the living? Indeed, these stories relate to her desire to see her dead baby again, but they also appeal to her vitalistic sensibilities which hold to the immaterial existence of the human spirit. Mary Shelley may have been silent in the presence Percy, Bryon, and others in their discussions of ghosts, vitalism, and materialism, but in the assumed privacy of her journal, she records what she values as legitimate or reasonably possible. Vitalism offers the hope of spiritual existence and the potentiality of reunion with the dead; materialism offers no such hope—her child is simply gone, the
dead are dead. Yet in theistic vitalism, there is a glimmer of hope. Mary Shelley can acknowledge that her child is indeed gone, but she can ask the logical question—gone where?—and she can hope for a future spiritual reunion. After the death of Percy Shelley, she revisits this hope found in theistic vitalism: “You will be with me in all my studies, dearest love! Your voice will no longer applaud me, but in spirit you will visit and encourage me: I know you will. What were I, if I did not believe that you still exist? It is not with you as with another. I believe that we all live hereafter” (Jones 183). Indeed, Mary Shelley’s specific theology of life, death, and an afterlife is not clearly outlined in her writings. However, she offers enough glimpses into her dreams, thoughts, hopes, and desires to suggest that her views are best understood within the context of theistic vitalism which holds to a material and immaterial reality that is created and orchestrated by a providential God.

Mary Shelley’s theistic vitalism certainly did not go unchallenged. The other key influences on her novel—Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and Byron’s physician Polidori—were unabashedly antitheistic materialists. Mary and Percy shared an enthusiasm for scientific inquiry, and they intensely believed that medical science could benefit humanity. They differed, however, in their faith in the ethical integrity of the individual scientist’s methods of scientific investigation. According to Alan Rauch in *Useful Knowledge: The Victorians, Morality, and the March of Intellect* (2001), Mary’s theism sought to hold science accountable to a more traditional Christian ethic, while Percy’s antitheistic worldview sought to free science from any normative ethical standards (126-27). Both Percy and Polidori viewed science and its methods of inquiry from a philosophical perspective that was largely informed by the materialism of Lawrence. Polidori attended Lawrence’s lectures in the spring of 1816 in which the vitalism of Abernathy and others was viciously criticized, often through unflattering *ad hominem* attacks. Percy may have first met Lawrence in 1811 while attending Abernathy’s lectures on anatomy, and by 1814 Lawrence had become Percy and Mary’s personal physician (Mellor, “Frankenstein, Racial Science” 9; Richardson 160-63). Lawrence directly shaped Percy’s scientific naturalism, and he made an impression upon Mary as well, becoming the inspiration for the Prof. Waldman character (Mellor, “Frankenstein, Racial Science” 7). During the now famous outing in Geneva that lead, among other things, to the writing of *Frankenstein*, Polidori records in his journal that he and Percy discussed whether humans were nothing more than
mechanistic instruments produced by an arbitrary universe or if they were creatures fashioned by God with eternal metaphysical selves (Rossetti 122-23). In her 1831 introduction, Mary mentions similar scientific discussions between Percy and Byron which advocated the materialism presented in the Lawrence lectures. Although Mary was witness to these discussions, it seems that she was a "nearly silent" dissenter who was not persuaded from her theistic vitalism. Mary recalls in her introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*:

Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated. They talked of the experiments of Dr Darwin ... who preserved a piece of vermicelli in a glass case, till by some extraordinary means it began to move with voluntary motion. Not thus, after all, would life be given. Perhaps a corpse would be reanimated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth. (Butler 195-96)

Given the strong influence of Coleridge's theistic theology, Davy's scientific vitalism, which Coleridge also advocated (Roe, Introduction 10-14), and her many journal entries regarding a providential creator God and her belief in metaphysical realities and an afterlife, it is reasonable to read Mary's near silence more as dissent than agreement. Silent dissent was her chosen strategy for handling public disagreement and contentious debate. In her journal on October 21, 1838, she writes,

I am not a person of opinions. I have said elsewhere that human beings differ greatly in this. Some have a passion for reforming the world; others do not cling to particular opinions.... I respect such when joined to real disinterestedness, toleration, and a clear understanding.... For myself, I earnestly desire the good and enlightenment of my fellow-creatures, and see all, in the present course, tending to the same, and rejoice; but I am not for violent extremes, which only bring on an injurious reaction. I have never written a word in disfavor of liberalism; that I have not supported it openly in writing, arises from the following causes, as far as I know:—

That I have not argumentative powers; I see things pretty clearly, but cannot demonstrate them. Besides, I feel the counter-arguments too
strongly. I do not feel that I could say aught to support the cause efficiently; besides that, on some topics (especially with regard to my own sex), I am far from making up my mind.... When I feel that I can say what will benefit my fellow-creatures, I will speak: not before. (Jones 204)

Here, Mary is responding specifically to criticism regarding her relative silence on radical political causes. However, it is reasonable to conclude that she followed this same intellectual principle in the context of the debates over radical science. Given her clear theistic and vitalistic persuasions, her careful study of Davy's vitalistic chemistry, and the lack of evidence suggesting she read or ascribed to Lawrence's scientific views, it makes sense to conclude that she remained largely silent in these scientific discussions because she did not feel she possessed the argumentative powers to articulate and sustain her position.

Moreover, she may not have spoken much during these discussions, but she speaks her mind clearly in this introduction by contrasting the materialism of Erasmus Darwin with the vitalism of Davy. She notes that the Darwinian experiment was unconvincing and says, "Not thus, after all, would life be given" (Butler 195). Then, she describes a mechanical assembling of component body parts, which according to the materialist model should be enough to produce life. However, in her imaginative speculation, mere order or patterned organization is not enough—the parts must be "endued with vital warmth" (Butler 196), a phrase that brings to mind the very language of her earlier dream in which her dead baby is brought back to life with vital warmth. Indeed, Marilyn Butler compares Mary Shelley's account of these vitalist-materialist discussions to the account given by Polidori in his diary. Butler suggests that Polidori frames the question as a vitalist while Mary Shelley frames the issue as a materialist (xxii-xxiii). However, I find Butler puts too fine a point on the comparisons and draws too grand a conclusion. She argues that Mary Shelley's discussion reveals a materialistic skepticism like that of Lawrence. However, Mary Shelley simply notes a reasonable skepticism in reanimation by merely preserving or pickling vermicelli, yet she wonders about the possibility of electricity imbuing a dead corpse with vital life. Here, she speaks from the electrochemical context of Davy's vitalism theories: that chemistry (what we would now call biochemistry) may be the science for understanding vitality of life. The theoretical implication is compelling enough to spark her imagination and to pursue that vitalistic possibility as a scientific frame in which to bring her ghost story to literary life. According to her account
of these discussions and her own imaginative speculations in response to Erasmus Darwin's experiments, Mary does not appear to embrace the materialism espoused by Lawrence, Percy, Byron, and Polidori. Rather, she was more convinced by the principles of vitalism as expressed in the science of Davy, confirmed by the theistic Christianity of Coleridge, and expressed in her own journal writings on life, death, and the afterlife. These scientific and theological principles form the logical foundation for Mary Shelley's ethical critique of scientific materialism in *Frankenstein*.

However, it was not easy for her to assert her young authorial voice and to oppose the charmingly intelligent yet at times overbearing and insensitive views of Percy and his circle of friends. Who was she, after all, compared to the great Percy and the renowned Byron? She was, as it turned out, a provocative writer coming into her own who would, unbeknownst to everyone, write one of the most influential and lasting novels of the nineteenth century. Yet, this novel would be born eventually out of a thematic and artistic struggle between Mary's theistic vitalism and Percy's atheistic materialism. For the most part, Percy's revisions and edits correct some of Mary's stylistic awkwardness and grammatical errors; however, other of his revisions attempt to temper, if not wholly silence, some of her theistic expressions. For example, Percy tried to revise or delete some of Mary's original language that showed an understanding of God whose purposes worked providentially within human history. Toward the end of the novel where Victor describes his pursuit of the Creature as less an act of vengeance and more a providential work of God, Mary's first draft reads, "At such moments the vengeance that burned within me died in my heart and I pursued my path towards the destruction of the daemon more as a task enjoined by heaven than the ardent desire of my soul" (Robinson, *Frankenstein* 412). Percy revised this passage as follows: "At such moments the vengeance that burned within me died in my heart, and I pursued my path towards the destruction of the daemon more as a task enjoined by heaven, as the mechanical impulse of some power of which I was unconscious, than the ardent desire of my soul" (Robinson, *Frankenstein* 227).1 Mary's version is more consistent with her theistic view of God working providentially in a person's life, that God orders or directs a course of action and the person follows that direction. Percy's version forces his own mechanistic meaning upon the phrase "enjoined by heaven" with the qualifying phrase, "as the mechanical impulse of some power of which I was unconscious." For Mary, Victor sees himself as doing the work of heaven, of
acting not from self-serving vengeance but in the service of divine justice for the greater good. For Percy, Victor becomes a thoughtless automaton of some unidentifiable and unknowable, mindless power of nature. As Anne Mellor notes, “Percy tried to undermine this notion of a functioning ‘heaven’ by adding his own atheistic concept of a universe created and controlled by pure Power or energy” (Mary Shelley 64). Where Mary expresses in the text an understanding of divine agency, purpose, and meaning within a theistic universe, Percy revises her language to assert his own faith in some arbitrary, unthinking power that operates as a mere unconscious impulse upon the mechanistic human within an antitheistic universe.

Another telling example is a revision of Mary’s language describing Victor’s scientific activity. Mary’s original manuscript reads:

> Although I possessed the capacity of bestowing animation yet to prepare a creature for the reception of it with all its intricacies of fibres muscles & veins must be a work of inconceivable labour & difficulty. ...but my imagination was too much exalted by my first successes to permit me to doubt of my ability to create an animal as complex and wonderful as man. ...A new creation would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent creatures would owe their existence to me. (Robinson, Frankenstein 272-73)

Percy revised this passage to read:

> Although I possessed the capacity of bestowing animation, yet to prepare a frame for the reception of it with all its intricacies of fibres, muscles, and veins still remained a work of inconceivable difficulty and labour. ...but my imagination was too much exalted by my first success to permit me to doubt of my ability to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man.... A new existence would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. (Robinson, Frankenstein 77-78)

To be sure, Percy’s revision is stylistically smoother and reduces creator, creation, and creature repetitiveness. However, Mary’s creationist language presupposes intelligence, intention, purpose, and the specific agency of a creative figure. Percy’s revisions draw from antitheistic, materialistic discourse in which life indeterminately emerges from a proper yet unknown arrangement of matter. Moreover, his language seeks to ignore or even deny the necessity of causality, agency, purpose, intentionality, and design behind that which exists.
There is an apparent worldview struggle between these two writer-editors. Percy held to a naturalistic theory of the origins of life, and he thus attempted to edit out the linguistic trace of God and theories of creation and intentional design in favor of methodological naturalism that believes life emerged spontaneously by chance or in response to arbitrary and unintelligent natural forces. Percy believed that nature somehow gave rise to itself naturally. Mary's language is more attuned to the causal paradoxes of naturalism (she seems to understand that it is a nonsensical position to presuppose that life naturally caused itself to arise from non-living matter), and she originally intended for the theistic notion of creation to inform the thematics of her work. In her theistic worldview, there is design, purpose, and meaning, and there is a way to determine objective truth, both philosophically and morally. Indeed, Mary recognized that it may be difficult at times to discern this purpose and meaning, as evidenced by her journal entries occasioned by the many losses and tragedies in her life, and as suggested by the various characters in the novel who struggle to understand the significance of the challenges, hardships, and injustices they encounter. However, Mary also understood that just because it is sometimes difficult to know exactly why certain things happen, this does not mean that it is necessarily impossible to determine the significance of these events. In her journals as described above, she often returned to a theistic faith in providence and a created order that offered her hope of reunification in an afterlife. Challenges and confusions in life and difficulties in determining meaning and purpose did not cause her to jump to the non sequitur conclusion that there is no objective meaning or purpose whatsoever. Mary was far less agnostic about absolute truth and less skeptical about the possibility to discern meaning in life than was Percy. Although Mary sometimes struggled artistically with Percy over editing issues due to the tensions between their conflicting worldviews, ultimately Mary presents a cogent philosophical response to methodological naturalism and an existential indictment against scientific materialism.

Mary Shelley clearly appreciated the ethical implications of the vitalism-materialism debate, because she was concerned about the consequences not only of actions but of ideas as well. The theistic vitalist position posits a divinely created soul, and thus asserts that human subjects do not fashion their own morality but, instead, seek to discover absolute moral law that is defined by an absolutely good moral law giver. The mere assertion of an absolute moral law indeed does not guarantee moral behavior. For example,
through his exposure to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the Creature embraces the Christian theistic worldview and its revelation of an absolute moral law, yet he still commits murder.\(^2\) However, the theistic understanding of absolute morality does provide a rationally consistent basis upon which to defend objective moral judgments. After Percy's death, Mary starts a programmatic study of moral philosophy and ethical theory, noting in 1823 that "I think also that I have found true humility..., an ardent love for the immutable laws of right, much native goodness of emotion, and purity of thought" (Jones 189). In her own studies, Mary Shelley, like her Creature, discovers and embraces absolute moral law, what she calls "immutable laws of right." On the other hand, the materialist position is logically reductive, stripping humanity of its sacredness and removing from the universe any objective moral standard. Humans, according to this view, are thus free to do whatever they see fit. Morality is reduced to judgments of personal taste in service of subjective desire. In the vitalism-materialism debates, Abernathy makes this very point about the moral consequence of materialism, noting in a lecture in 1817 that the primary reason materialists were reluctant to admit mind-body dualism and the presence of a soul that is superadded to the material body was that conceding this point would necessitate giving up the subjective privilege of skepticism, namely "gratifying their senses, and acting as their reason dictates, for their own advantages, independently of all other considerations" (qtd. in Hindle 34). Materialism justifies (but does not necessitate) a relativistic morality that is centered upon the pursuit of selfish desires divorced from any objective moral standard.

Such a moral perspective was quite appealing to Percy who based his radical values and selfish behavior upon materialistic notions of moral relativity, causing Mary much personal grief and emotional pain. According to Mellor, Mary eventually realized that Percy's views and actions masked an emotional narcissism, an unwillingness to confront the origins of his own desires or the impact of his demands on those most dependent upon him. Percy's pressure on Mary, during the winter and spring of 1814-15, to take Hogg as a lover despite her sexual indifference to Hogg; his insistence on Claire's continuing presence in his household despite Mary's stated opposition—all this had alerted Mary to a worrisome strain of selfishness in Percy's character, an egotism that too often rendered him an insensitive husband and an uncaring, irresponsible parent. (*Mary Shelley* 73)
Such behaviors are more than mere character flaws or psychological predispositions; rather, they are the logical and experiential outworking of the theoretical ideas of materialism and moral relativism. The consequence of Percy's relativistic morality was quite painful for Mary, and she suffered emotional loss and spiritual pain at the hands of Percy's subjective morality, engendered in part by his philosophical and scientific materialism. Mary's own existential cries of the heart during this time of her life became the creative source for the pathos in the novel, where numerous lives are tragically destroyed due to Victor's arrogantly selfish actions resulting from his own indulgence of scientific materialism and moral subjectivism. As Tannenbaum concludes, "The complex pattern of shifting, mistaken, and half-recognized mythic identifications in the novel serve to undercut the faith in empirical knowledge that is the initial cause of Frankenstein's fall. Describing a world that contains no absolutes, no truths beyond the evidence of the senses, Mary Shelley shows this world to be a Miltonic Hell, a world beyond redemption, either by Christian agape or by eros" (112-13). In *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley levels an existential critique of scientific materialism by graphically representing the horrific consequences of a scientist who reduces life to nothing but a complex arrangement of materials and who exerts a transgressive autonomy that denies God's natural design and moral law in an attempt to create life in the absence of woman after his own filthy image. The result of such an irresponsible pursuit and application of science is emotional chaos, spiritual devastation, domestic disruption, and existential despair.

One way to resolve the misapplication of science is through proper education and ethical literacy. Mary Shelley understood the value of such education, sharing with parents William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft the belief that access to knowledge was fundamental to the development of the person in a free and just society. However, Mary Shelley was not so naïve as to think that education alone, unguided by moral principle, would automatically lead to enlightenment and freedom. Rather, she understood that educational content, moral knowledge, and the application of knowledge in the world mattered very much. Education alone does not make a person good, as *Frankenstein* demonstrates time and again. Developing moral character involves an ethically guided education and instruction in moral knowledge. The importance of a proper education is a central theme in *Frankenstein*, as evidenced by the presence of numerous literacy narratives, most notably those of Walton, the Creature, Safie, and Victor.
It is through Victor's development as a scientist that we most clearly see Mary Shelley's concern over the moral consequences of scientific pursuits informed by materialistic presuppositions. The misguided integration of outmoded alchemy with scientific naturalism ultimately transforms Victor into a materialist motivated by transgressive hubris. The consequences of his scientific education and experimentation are horrifically tragic. In his youthful studies of the ancient alchemists, Victor develops a love of science and metaphysics, longing to understand the mystical and divine causes behind the veil of the physical world. These studies awakened a desire to grasp the metaphysical power animating life and determining reality: "I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher's stone and the *elixir of life*. But the latter obtained my undivided attention; wealth was an inferior object, but what glory would attend the discovery if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death" (Robinson, *Frankenstein* 64-65). There is indeed a glimpse of benevolence in his desire to study science—he wishes to benefit humanity by conquering disease, aging, and even natural death. However, this humanitarianism is immediately dispelled in the same breath by his selfish desire for glory, which in turn motivates his hubris and his desire for transgressive autonomy.

Victor applies the same zealous enthusiasm that he showed for the alchemists to his new studies at the University of Ingolstadt. His introduction to natural philosophy and contemporary science at first disappoints him. He soon recognizes the erroneous content of alchemy, but he holds on to the motivations behind it—to discover divine knowledge and eternal power. His ultimate goal is complete creative autonomy that transgresses professional, social, legal, and moral boundaries, and the modern sciences he begins to study at first leave the ambitious Victor singularly unimpressed:

Besides, I had a contempt for the uses of modern natural philosophy. It was very different when the masters of the science sought immortality and *power*: such views, although futile, were grand. But *now the scene was changed: the ambition of the enquirer seemed to limit itself to the annihilation of those visions on which my interest in science was chiefly founded. I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur, for the realities of little worth.* (Robinson, *Frankenstein* 71)

At this point, he understands that the extravagant claims of alchemy are unrealistic and unattainable, but he is charmed by their expansiveness,
transcendence, and transgressiveness. Such grand motivations and expectations, so he believes, are missing from practical science. But then he meets Waldman, who introduces him to materialistic science in such a way that rekindles Victor's desires for scientific autonomy. Waldman's teaching convinces Victor that the ancient dreams of alchemy are in fact achievable with the new science. For example, in one lecture, Waldman asserts,

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, mimick the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadows. (Robinson, *Frankenstein* 72)

Victor realizes that where the alchemists have failed, the materialists succeed. He concludes that the new naturalists have unlocked the secrets of nature and have even invaded the very gates of Heaven, thus usurping the knowledge and position of God. He is now confident that this new materialistic science will allow him to achieve his lofty goal of discovering the infinite mind of God.

Interestingly, at this point in his confessional discourse with Walton, Victor expresses (in the 1831 edition) what appears to be religious fatalism:

Such were the professor's words—rather let me say such the words of fate, enounced to destroy me. As he went on, I felt as if my soul were grappling with a palpable enemy; one by one the various keys were touched which formed the mechanism of my being: chord after chord was sounded, and soon my mind was filled with one thought, one conception, one purpose. So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein,—more, far more, will I achieve: treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation. (Butler 213-14)

Since this passage does not appear in the 1818 edition, it can be argued that Mary later added a religious or theistic fatalism to the character of Victor, thus complicating the argument that Victor is a failed materialist and thus the vehicle for Mary's philosophical critique. However, the specific language that Victor uses to reconstruct these events later to Walton
clearly suggests materialistic determinism, not religious fatalism, for he presents himself as a victim of mechanistic functions beyond his control. Victor asserts that he is a mechanism comprised of various keys, and he compares his soul to a complex musical instrument. Victor is not claiming to be gripped by some unseen metaphysical power, force, demon, or deity; rather, the words of Waldman work upon the mechanism of his being such that a harmony of sorts ("chord after chord was sounded") is finally reached between Waldman's words and Victor's mechanistic being. Victor is basically claiming that his mind (which in the materialistic perspective is nothing but brain matter) was mechanistically predisposed to this kind of thinking and that he was physiologically fated to react the way he ultimately did. Victor uses his materialistic worldview to redefine the grappling in his mind, which is actually a reasonable moral struggle of conscience, as nothing but the tension between a culturally imposed morality and the drives of his mechanistic nature. As the contemporary materialist Richard Dawkins has asserted, in this universe there is nothing but "blind, pitiless indifference. ... DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is. And we dance to its music" (133). According to scientific materialism, Victor is merely dancing to the tune of his DNA and is thus genetically fated to pursue this destructive project. As he continues his studies, he eventually develops into the exemplar materialist that he was seemingly predisposed to become, and he attempts to replace God with natural science and to transform himself into a materialistic god. He seeks to demystify natural design by revealing through science the mechanistic causes of perceived natural effects, and as he demystifies the sacred, he seeks to replace a supposedly mythological divinity with the tangible materialist scientist, namely himself: "A new existence would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me" (Robinson, Frankensteins 78). Here is his ultimate transgression—he wants to be the creator, the source, the necessary being of this new life form. He wants to be fully autonomous, to become a creator and a law unto himself. The ramifications of thus reducing the divine God to a materialistic scientist are nightmarish and catastrophic.

Victor's materialism and its horrific consequences are most poignantly expressed in the scenes leading up to and including the Creature's animation. In order to understand the very nature and cause of life, Victor ironically concludes from the paradoxical logic of materialism that he must study death and natural decay. Life, in this scientific view, is nothing more than the epiphenomena of packets of energy in motion. Life is nothing but
a complex assemblage of materials, operating within systems of material relations. To understand life, this logic therefore concludes, one need only study its reducible materials long enough. Thus, Victor spends hours and hours in graveyards, vaults, and charnel-houses studying the material remnants of life—dead bodies (Robinson, *Frankenstein* 75-76). Ironically, he attempts to discover the secrets of life by studying death and decay, and for all the attention to death in his attempt to understand life, he learns nothing of life and courts only death. This repressed truth surfaces in his grotesque dream of Elizabeth, his bride-to-be, who transforms into the hideous corpse of his dead mother (Robinson, *Frankenstein* 81-82). This dream reveals, among other things, the horrific irony of trying to discover the origin of life by merely studying dead and dismembered body parts. This dream also exposes the horrific ramifications of his desire for materialistic creative autonomy. He wants to create life by himself without the biological complement of woman, and this violation of natural design justifies, and arguably necessitates, the erasure of women. His transgressive autonomy results in the figurative and literal death of all the women in his life. In his pursuit of materialistic knowledge, Victor ignored the life around him and thus gave birth to death-in-life (his Creature), brought death to his family, destroyed his own mind and body, and ultimately succumbed to his own pathetic death. The mysteries of life and all its sacredness, Mary Shelley shows us, is not found within the decaying matter of dead or dying bodies. Rather, she demonstrates how the beauty, power, meaning, and sacredness of life are to be found in that which makes life so special to begin with—relationships with friends, family, colleagues, and the divine.

Mary Shelley further reveals the intellectual, spiritual, and moral bankruptcy of materialism in the body of the Creature. Victor's blind materialism and selfish desire for creative autonomy result in the creature's physical hideousness. Victor chooses to make the Creature monstrous and huge, because it would be faster and easier from a procedural perspective: "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; that is to say, about seven or eight feet in height, and proportionably large" (Robinson, *Frankenstein* 77). The reason for Victor's impatience is his conscience: he wants to hurry through his grisly endeavor before his moral sensibilities to life's true significance catch up with him. He does get glimpses of moral clarity during the process, but he must do all he can to ignore what he knows deep within to be morally wrong:
In a solitary chamber—or rather cell at the top of the house and separated from all the other apartments by a gallery and staircase—I kept my workshop of filthy creation; my eyeballs were starting from their sockets in attending to the details of my employment. The dissecting room and the slaughter house furnished many of my materials, and often did my human nature turn with loathing from my occupation whilst, still urged on by an eagerness which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion. (Robinson, Frankenstein Notebooks 1: 89)

The striking image in this passage is that of his eyes starting from their sockets in horror at what he is doing. Indeed, he is referring to his own eyes, but the phrase also conjures the macabre image of other eyeballs in his inventory of body parts, gazing a ghastly stare of shocked condemnation from the cadaverous sockets of skulls sitting on the shelves of his “workshop of filthy creation.” Victor struggles with the horrifying disparity between the reality he actually sees with his own eyes and the reality he wishes this scene to be as he visualizes it in his crazed imagination, calling to mind William Blake’s powerful lines:

This life's five windows of the soul
Distort the Heavens from Pole to Pole,
And leads you to believe a lie
When you see with, not thro', the eye. (172-75)

Victor’s materialism sees merely with the eye, devoid of a conscience, but his spiritual nature resists such moral blindness and attempts to see through the eye with the moral clarity of his conscience, which reveals to him the true horror of his work and the depravity of his very being. This truth he must suppress if he is to complete his materialistic endeavor to blur the physical and genetic boundaries between species in order to find larger materials to make the work easier and faster. He selfishly considers only his pride and achievement, totally disregarding the physical and emotional wellbeing of his creation. He cannot show love for the being he has created, because his materialism views the Creature only as a collection of human and animal parts. Victor cannot ascribe any true value or human worth to his Creature. Victor’s materialism devalues life, ultimately viewing it either as a chance accident or an abortive mutation. Many horrors are possible once life is reduced to arbitrarily arranged particles; yet sadly, strict materialism cannot even speak of moral horrors, for this is a value judgment that is irrelevant.
and unsubstantiated in a materialistic worldview—“DNA neither cares nor
knows. DNA just is” (Dawkins 133). However, Mary Shelley suggests that
such ethical disregard is unnatural and illogical. Victor's own conscience
cries out against the horrors of his work: “often did my human nature turn
with loathing from my occupation, whilst still urged on by an eagerness
which perpetually increased, I brought my work near to a conclusion”
(Robinson, Frankenstein Notebook 1:89). Written on his heart are the
knowledge of life's ultimate worth and the awareness that this value is not
linked to the material but to the transcendent. This truth is readily and
naturally apparent to Victor, but he must suppress this inner voice of moral
reason if he is to conclude his transgressive scientific enterprise.

The most tragic consequence of Victor's materialism is his rejection of
the creature: “I had worked hard for nearly two years for the sole purpose of
infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest
and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation;
but, now that I had succeeded, these dreams vanished, and breathless horror
and disgust filled my heart” (Robinson, Frankenstein 81). After creating life
without the complement of woman and with indifference to God, Victor's
transformation into a transgressive materialist is complete. As Ann Engar
notes, “Frankenstein is a thorough materialist and creates without calling on
the supernatural” (142). Victor now only sees his creature as a monstrous
assemblage of grisly materials, a grotesque body of nightmarish horror.
However, Victor's response is not simply aesthetic. Indeed, the Creature
is physically ugly, but that isn't the main reason why Victor rejects and
abandons him. Victor's materialism does not provide a rational justification
for valuing and loving the Creature unconditionally. To Victor, the
Creature is not a unique life deserving of love, nurturing, care, or concern.
Rather, it is a no-thing, just grotesque and meaningless matter, merely an
experiment gone horribly wrong. The Creature is not a life for which Victor
is responsible. Rather, it is a frightening and inconvenient mistake that he
wishes did not exist. In the Creature's own words, he is “an abortion to be
spurned and kicked and hated!” (Robinson, Frankenstein 243).

Moreover, the Creature's status as a spurned other can be linked
to a form of racism supported by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century
materialistic sciences that Mary Shelley rejected. The Creature is clearly
symbolic of racial alterity, and he recognizes his own racial otherness.
From C. F. Volney's Ruins of Empires and the Law of Nature (1791) the
Creature learns about the injustices inflicted upon various oppressed races
around the world. He is particularly struck by the plight of the Native Americans, and by contemplating this history he realizes how worldviews which characterize groups of people as subhuman contribute to racial hatred and dehumanizing tyranny (Robinson, *Frankenstein* 144-45). One logical outworking of materialistic sciences of race from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the systematic redefinition of certain groups of people as nonhuman, resulting in the justification of racism and oppression of the racial other. In her article “*Frankenstein, Racial Science, and the Yellow Peril,*” Anne Mellor outlines the racist dimensions of various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century materialistic conceptions of race (3-10). According to Mellor, Mary Shelley rejected these scientific views that legitimated racial stereotyping and encouraged racial hatred. Instead, she advocated the Family of Man theory, a view of human origins and race that argued all human beings descended from the same created couple. In this theistic worldview, all humans of all races are created in God’s image and are thus equally valuable and deserving of respect, kindness, and liberty. Mellor argues that Mary Shelley looked to universal domesticity—the Family of Man—as the ultimate answer to racism (“*Frankenstein, Racial Science*” 22-25). In other words, Mary Shelley rejected materialistic naturalism, which reduces humanity to arbitrarily evolved animals devoid of any intrinsic value, resulting in the scientifically justified practice of classifying difference as foreign, diseased, alien, monstrous, and other. She suggested that the human individual should be valued as a unique creation and that racial differences should be embraced as integral to the complexity and true beauty of the Family of Man. In *Frankenstein* the Creature is paradoxically both the benefactor and victim of materialistic creation. Materialism gives rise to his very existence, but it is also responsible for the literal hell on earth that becomes his life. Because of the materialistic presupposition that the Creature is nothing but meaningless and valueless matter, Victor views him as a nonhuman thing, a subhuman being, and a racial other. Victor is a flawed creator who condemns the Creature to emotional and communal isolation, not because of anything that the Creature did initially to deserve such banishment, but because Victor himself is fallen and incapable of being the divine creator he set out to be. The Creature’s tragic saga serves as a powerful symbolic critique of the immoral ramifications of materialistic sciences that dehumanize individuals because of racial, genetic, or other forms of physiological difference. Mary Shelley counters this racist materialism with universal domesticity or the theistic notion of the Family
of Man in which all humans are viewed as equally valuable and deserving of respect, dignity, and community because they are wondrously fashioned in the image of their Creator.

As a materialist, Victor's main failing is his inability to understand the spiritual significance of universal domesticity and the importance of extending it to his own creation. However, all is not lost, for there is redemptive hope for the materialist. Mary Shelley presents domesticity and eternal communion as the liberators of a mind trapped within the confines of a materialistic worldview. Arguably, she does seem to problematize domesticity, question marital union, complicate friendship, and undermine the hope of spiritual transcendence, revealing such manifestations of communion to be more a source of personal pain and social disruption than stability and comfort. This rejection of the domestic ideal is witnessed most powerfully in Victor's tragic life: his own mother dies, he leaves home to study natural philosophy and the new sciences, he isolates himself from friends and colleagues in his little shop of horrors, he further withdraws from his father, he neglects his fiancée, he creates life by himself without needing the biological complement of woman, and then he rejects his own creation which results in the violent destruction of life and the disruption of other families and relationships. Victor's life alone is a litany of domestic devastation. However, these tragic occurrences are not an indictment of the family as such but, instead, serve as cautionary tales about the neglect of the domestic impulse. These horrors are negative examples against which Mary Shelley upholds the desire for and necessity of undisturbed familial communion and domestic relationship as the solutions to the problems of failed community. Victor's transgressive autonomy creeps in and destroys the possibility of ideal communion; however, Mary Shelley contrasts this destructive selfishness (a description of things as they are in the novel) with the ideal of undisturbed domesticity as the necessary, central, and foundational element of proper human existence (a desire for things as they ideally ought to be).

Contrasting Victor's communal failure is the Creature's deep yearning for the domestic ideal that offers the hope of personal redemption. All along, the Creature sought communion with his creator. Unfortunately, Victor failed as a self-styled god and could not provide a nurturing relationship, thus driving the Creature to murderous revenge. At the end of Victor's life, it is the Creature who shows true humility and sincere remorse, eventually asking his creator for forgiveness. This contrition reveals the
creature's deeper understanding of the spiritual and existential necessity of communion. Even though he did not establish a temporal relationship with his fallen, human creator, he ultimately realizes that his humble act of repentance and his seeking forgiveness has opened him up to a transcendent communion that will finally afford him the eternal peace he so desperately sought from his creator: "My spirit will sleep in peace; or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus" (Robinson, Frankenstein Notebooks 2: 773). He plans to commit his body to the flames, but he is confident that his spirit will not simply cease to exist. The Creature is no annihilationist, nor is he a nihilistic existentialist. He is clearly a mind-body dualist, and though he is not entirely sure what will become of his soul, he is confident that it will consciously exist, be it as a sleeping dreamer or as a thinking agent. In either case, he will no longer suffer the tragedy and indignities of his earthly life. This scene moves Walton to deep compassion for the Creature's plight and a sympathetic understanding of the tragic pathos of Victor's and the Creature's lives. Although at the end of Victor's own tale Walton views this scientist as noble and godlike, the Creature's humility and remorse break the chains of Walton's own materialistic worldview and dispels his desire for glory at any cost. His eyes are fully opened to the wisdom found in valuing life, love, family, and relationships, a wisdom that forever eluded Victor. Walton understands the value of his own family, the lives of his crew, and their relationship to their own families. He realizes that there is greater meaning to life than what is explainable by materialism or found in personal pursuits of glory, and this meaning is discovered within the dynamics of relationships, both temporal and eternal.

As a Gothic novel, it is easy to see Frankenstein as a narrative marked by extravagant excess and horrific transgression. However, if Mary Shelley indeed embraced the materialistic worldview of Thelwall, Lawrence, Percy, Byron, and Polidori, then an interesting paradox presents itself: in a strictly materialistic framework, can there really be any true transgression? Victor's scientific act of creating life from lifeless matter suggests that his transgression is more than merely scientific. The act of reanimating dead tissue, of assembling life and giving rise to mind and consciousness from previously inanimate, unthinking, nonconscious, dead material is surely a prodigious accomplishment that amounts to the ultimate in transgression, because Victor seems to be violating the very structure, logic, and law of nature. However, to view this creative act as a transgression of some law or design of nature presupposes a designed universe and a created order.
that ought not to be transgressed. From a purely materialistic perspective, there is no created order, only arbitrary nature that at best has merely the appearance of order and design. If this is true, then there can be no true transgression, no rebellion, no Promethean hubris, because there is no actual design or absolute law that is transgressed. There is only yet another natural agent in a series of natural, materialistic agents, each contributing to the ongoing creation and recreation, or more accurately evolution and revolution, of life. The logical conclusion of the materialistic perspective is that without absolute, universal, or divine design or order, there is no objective, ultimate, or eternal standard or value against which to transgress. Denying a created or designed order nullifies, at least in principle, the very possibility of true transgression. Therefore, it becomes meaningless to refer to Victor as a transgressor. If anything, Victor merely transgresses temporal and arbitrary customs, codes, tastes, and taboos that are historically and culturally relative. Ultimately, the transgression is of no real consequence, because that which is supposedly transgressed is nothing more than an insignificant and arbitrary notion that one can subjectively choose to reject. If the novel is ultimately an expression of materialism, then it seems problematic, if not impossible, to speak meaningfully of it as an exploration of Gothic transgression.

However, does Mary Shelley actually eviscerate her novel by embracing and expressing a materialistic worldview? Why is it that her novel still speaks to audiences so powerfully even today, such that the term "Frankensteinian" is applied to scientific endeavors of questionable intent or troubling outcome? Could it be that Mary Shelley was rather prescient in her ethical critique of science? It seems clear that what concerned her was that Victor transgressed not merely arbitrary taboos or relativistic moral codes but universal moral laws, what she called "immutable laws of right" (Jones 189), that are discernible, in part, in the natural design of the universe and thus expressed in natural law. Because of this appeal to a universal natural law, this novel still speaks to us today, asserting that we are not intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually equipped to handle some forms of knowledge and that, as such, there are reasonable limits to science. Moreover, this novel reminds us, whether we like it or not, that philosophical ideas and scientific theories have very real consequences. There is no such thing as a neutral or harmless idea. This novel explores the ramifications of materialistic concepts that deny the theistic universe and its design, order, and purpose. If materialistic scientists presuppositionally remove God as
the necessary being of created reality, then they are free to inhabit that vacated divine position themselves without fear of transgression, because theoretically there is no moral law or Moral Law Giver to transgress. As such, there is no true or meaningful moral difficulty, beyond what is arbitrarily, subjectively, or otherwise idiosyncratically determined. In her carefully constructed Gothic novel, Mary Shelley speaks against such a philosophical view, presenting readers with the horrific consequences of the ultimate transgressive act—Adam declaring God dead and His design null and void and then creating in his own filthy image, in the assumed absence of God, and in the tragically real absence of woman who is physically and spiritually complementary and necessary. The result is a monstrous external expression of internal depravity, the propagation of existential isolation and despair, and the destruction of friendships, families, and communities that were, by design, created for the perpetuation, development, nurturing, and comfort of humanity.

New York Institute of Technology

NOTES

1Italics in the Robinson edition of the 1818 published text of *Frankenstein* indicate Percy Shelley's revisions of Mary Shelley's 1816-1817 draft.

2For a fuller discussion of the Creature's informed and intellectual embracing of Christian theism, see Ryan.

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