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The Monstrosity of Parental Involvement: Formation through Reading in Shelley and Rousseau

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Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is, at face value, a critique of parental neglect. After Victor Frankenstein succeeds in "discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more ... [becomes] capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter," he abandons his creation.¹ In language evoking both sexual experience and childbirth, he initially describes how "the astonishment which I had at first experienced on this discovery soon gave place to delight and rapture. After so much time spent in painful labor, to arrive at once at the summit of my desires, was the most gratifying consummation of my toils."² Piecing together a "human frame" out of parts gleaned in "charnel houses," "the dissecting room and the slaughter-house," he creates a living being.³ The moment it breathes and moves, however, Victor views its creation as a "catastrophe." "[B]reathless horror and disgust filled my heart," he recounts.⁴ Victor abandons the monster and in doing so sets off a chain of events leading to the death of himself and everyone he cares about. As Shelley's novel traces the monster's sentimental (mis)education through both Victor's telling and the monster's own narrative, readers see the monster shift from sympathetic identification with humanity to outraged desire for vengeance against the parent who neglected to attend with sufficient care to his formation, physical and moral.

Frankenstein was not Shelley's only critique of parental neglect. In her biographical essay on Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Lives of the Most Eminent French Writers*, she condemned Rousseau's abandonment of his and Therese le Vasseur's children to a foundling hospital. Shelley judges this action "criminal": "Five of his children were thus sent to a receptacle where few survive; and those who do go through life are brutified by their situation or depressed by the burden, ever weighing at the heart, that they have not inherited the commonest right of humanity, a parent's care."⁵ Shelley notes the distance Rousseau kept between

himself and Therese (comparable to Victor's from his fiancée Elizabeth during his act of creation), and his persistence in believing he did right. Like Victor, who brings the monster to life with no plan for taking care of it and then maintains, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, that the monster could never have been well-raised anyway, Rousseau "first acted, he says, without serious examination of the morality of his conduct; but when he commenced author, he gave attentive consideration to the point and satisfied himself that he did right."⁶

Herself conceived by unmarried writers, Shelley had grounds for taking affront. Her parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, had dropped their infamous opposition to marriage once Wollstonecraft became pregnant, wedding for the baby's sake. The infant Mary Godwin was still unable to inherit her *mother's* care, as Wollstonecraft died of childbed fever ten days after giving birth. Raised by Godwin, she felt abandoned by him in childhood when he took a second wife (with whom Mary never got along) and then again when he refused to see her after she and Percy Bysshe Shelley took him at his (earlier) word on free love and eloped. Inheritor of her parents' insight that marital conventions entailed women's oppression for the sake of a small measure of protection, she was a staunch defender throughout her life of women left alone to care for dependents.⁷ Her perspective as Percy Shelley's wife gave her additional grounds to condemn Rousseau's fecklessness. "Like Frankenstein," as literary scholar Barbara Johnson wryly notes, "Percy was known for his unreliable chemistry experiments, and for his disregard for the life around him."⁸

Yet for all the correlations with her own tragic story of dead mother and dead babies (three of the Shelleys' four children died in early childhood, the first—whom Mary had not wanted—a year before Mary started writing this novel), *Frankenstein* is not autobiographical in any simple sense. And, as with the monster, it would be a grave mistake to take it at face value. *Frankenstein* is as much a critique of parental *involvement*—or, more precisely, of philosophical texts that engendered ideological prescriptions for 19th century mothers and that serve as important progenitors of contemporary parental involvement discourse—as of parental neglect.⁹ Of those philosophical texts, the most influential, and Shelley's main target, is Rousseau's *Emile*. At the heart of the novel, the monster tells

the story of his education by a family, the De Lacys, that replicates Rousseau's description of the household Emile and Sophie will set up to educate the next generation. The monster watches and listens from a shelter as Felix ("happy") De Lacy and his sister Agatha ("good") tend their cottage and care for their blind father, welcome Felix's beloved—an "Arabian" girl named Safie—and teach Safie to speak and read their language. His learning initially progresses more or less as Rousseau theorizes in *Emile*.¹⁰ When the monster decides to reveal himself to the De Lacys in the hope of winning their friendship, however, they turn on him violently because of his appearance. For the disheartened monster, this is the point where feelings of "rage and revenge" wipe out his sympathy with humanity.¹¹ Shelley's novel thus challenges *Emile's* promise to create, through parental education done right, future generations of men who are happy and good, or so this article argues. Shelley's challenge to *Emile's* premises extends beyond the pages about the De Lacys. Tracing connections between two pieces of Shelley's writing, *Frankenstein* and her biographical essay on Rousseau, and three of Rousseau's, the *Confessions*, *La Nouvelle Heloise*, and *Emile*, with a nod to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, this article reads *Frankenstein* as a young mother's rebuttal of discourse on motherhood that she correctly read as patriarchal, punitive, and silencing. In our current era of policy-makers and pundits enamored with telling mothers (and, increasingly, fathers) why their children's miseducations are their parents' fault, Shelley's recognition that model parents are a monstrous fantasy is refreshingly respectful of the complexity of parent/child relations.

I BECAME THE MAN WHOSE LIFE I READ

Written as a frame narrative, *Frankenstein* contains three nested first-person narratives. The monster's story is framed by Victor's, whose story is framed by the explorer Walton's letters to his sister Margaret Walton Saville, telling her of his encounter with Victor and the monster en route to the North Pole. The introduction, by another MWS, frames the whole. Actually, two introductions frame it, as the original 1818 introduction, written by Percy in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's name, was supplemented in the 1831 edition with a new intro-

duction, by Mary, that told the famous story of her conception of the novel in response to a ghost-story writing challenge posed by Percy and Lord Byron in the rainy summer of 1816. Both introductions contain a disavowal of her literary offspring. In the 1818 introduction, Percy has her offer this disclaimer: “The opinions which naturally spring from the character and situation of the hero are by no means to be conceived as existing always in my own conviction; nor is any inference justly to be drawn from the following pages as prejudicing any philosophical doctrine of whatever kind.”¹² The novel was originally published anonymously, and reviewers, who assumed that it was written by a man, criticized the novel’s perceived failure to moralize about the blasphemy of Victor’s actions. The revelation of its author as female only intensified that critique.¹³ In the 1831 introduction, Mary explains that she is willing to share the story of how the tale was conceived because “I shall thus give a general answer to the question so very frequently asked me—how I, then a young girl, came to think of and to *dilate* upon so very hideous an idea.”¹⁴ As her language suggests, books are akin to children, their creation a kind of childbirth, and both are understood to be reflections of their parents.

Johnson’s “My Monster/My Self” interprets the monster as a “figure” for the monstrosity of autobiography. While all publication is a kind of self-assertion, there is something especially narcissistic about autobiography, which attempts to reflect the self back to itself and replicate this self-image. As Judith Butler comments, to call the monster a *figure* “names the predicament” inherent in forming a self through writing one’s life story:

disrupting that narcissistic project and exposing that impossibility; it signifies precisely that dimension of the self one cannot bear to see at the same time that it absorbs and enacts the insuperable conflict of the autobiographical project itself. ... The monster does not merely reflect back the author [Shelley] or the character [Victor] but refuses to do so, running off in various directions, unmasterable and destructive.¹⁵

For women, Johnson writes, autobiographical writing has been doubly problematic:

since the very notion of a self, the very shape of human life stories, has always, from Saint Augustine to Freud, been modeled on the man. Rousseau's—or any man's—autobiography consists in the story of the difficulty of conforming to the standard of what a *man* should be. The problem for the female autobiographer is, on the one hand, to resist the pressure of masculine autobiography as the only literary genre available for her enterprise, and, on the other, to describe a difficulty in conforming to a feminine ideal which is largely a fantasy for the masculine, not the feminine, imagination.¹⁶

Johnson's scholarship opened doors to interpreting *Frankenstein* as commentary on the perils to women of forming a self through writing. Here, I explore *Frankenstein* as, also, commentary on the potential deformation of women's selves through *reading*. Insofar as male characters offer all the first-person accounts of reading in *Frankenstein*, it is not immediately obvious why reading should be treated as particularly dangerous to *women*. At the end of the telescoped narratives of miseducative reading, however, the monster's story alludes to Rousseau's most gender-fantastical texts, which portray a monstrous masculine fantasy of a feminine ideal to a feminized readership.

The question of what a man should be is at the forefront of Shelley's biographical essay on Rousseau. Written in an era when historical accounts of great men were considered an important mode of moral education, "Rousseau" begins with a character assessment. Shelley credits him with what she says, "in ordinary men ... would be named egotism or vanity" but in "men of imagination, and eloquence, and mental energy" amounts to a "lively and intimate apprehension of their own individuality, sensations and beings, which appears to be one of the elements of that order of minds which feel impelled to express their thoughts and disseminate their views and opinions through the medium of writing."¹⁷ This is a paradox worthy of Rousseau: what in ordinary men would be egotism is not egotism in men so egotistical they feel justified

in disseminating that ego. Given Shelley's sophistication as a reader and writer, this paradox should be treated like Rousseau's paradoxes, as a red flag, a warning to attend closely to forthcoming literary sleight-of-hand.

After a scant paragraph about Rousseau's birth in Geneva, his mother's death following childbirth, and his early upbringing by his father, Shelley's essay turns to another early influence: his reading material. The prominence she gives his account of this, juxtaposed with the preceding paradox, advises readers that to know what to make of Rousseau's writing, we need to know what to make of his reading. In an essay that generally narrates more than it quotes, Shelley includes an extended quotation from Rousseau's *Confessions* about Plutarch's *Lives*, which he read in childhood. Rousseau himself credits Plutarch with forming his character. It "cured me somewhat of my love for romances," he says, and "formed that independent and republican spirit, that proud untamable character, impatient of yoke and servitude."¹⁸ In turning from romances, i.e. novels, associated then as now with femininity, to Plutarch's *Lives*, Rousseau became a man as well as a citizen. "I became," he says, "the man whose life I read."¹⁹

Whether encountered in the original *Confessions* or in a book whose title—*Lives of the Most Eminent French Writers*—echoes Plutarch's, this statement is another red flag. Suppose that, as Rousseau claims, the reader of an account of an eminent man's life indeed becomes the man whose life he reads. Or, as the reader of a book titled *Lives*, becomes successive *men*, as one man's life story yields to the next. As readers of the life of Rousseau, what sort of man are *we* apt to become? Should we really run the risk of reading the life of *this* man, who generates lives only to abandon them?

Frankenstein includes several cautionary tales about the effects of reading on a child's formation. The most fraught is Victor's. "Natural philosophy is the genius that has regulated my fate," Victor tells the explorer Walton. "I desire therefore, in this narration, to state those facts which led to my predilection for that science."²⁰ When he was thirteen, on a family vacation to the spa-town of Thonon, inclement weather kept him inside and he "chanced to find a volume of the works of Cornelius Agrippa," a Renaissance philosopher fascinated by the occult.²¹ Upon reading Agrippa's works, says Victor, "A new light seemed to

dawn upon my mind; and, bounding with joy, I communicated my discoveries to my father.”²²

In Victor’s account, his father’s reaction was a turning point in his education. “I cannot help remarking here,” Victor says, “the many opportunities instructors possess of directing the attention of their pupils to useful knowledge, which they utterly neglect. My father looked carelessly at the title-page of my book, and said ‘Ah! Cornelius Agrippa! My dear Victor, do not waste your time upon this; it is sad trash.’”²³ In lieu of this brief warning, Victor says, his father might have “taken the pains to explain to me that the principles of Agrippa had been entirely exploded, and that a modern system of science had been introduced, which possessed much greater powers than the ancient, because the powers of the latter were chimerical, while those of the former were real and practical.”²⁴ Had his father redirected his interests, “it is even possible that the train of my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin.”²⁵

Contrasting lessons can be drawn from this story about how childhood reading forms the man. In the straightforward interpretation, reading unchecked by parental influence can deform a child, insofar as it draws him into flights of imagination whose outcomes are as uncontrollable as the monster. Walton’s tale of his childhood reading, which turned his imagination to nautical explorations, can also be explained this way. “This expedition has been the favorite dream of my early years,” he says. “I have read with ardor the accounts of the various voyages which have been made in the prospect of arriving at the North Pacific Ocean through the seas which surround the pole.”²⁶ As in Victor’s story, parental inattention is held responsible for miseducation. “My education was neglected,” says Walton, “yet I was passionately fond of reading. These volumes were my study day and night.”²⁷

Yet there is something unbalanced about Victor’s criticism of his father, Alphonse, as literary scholar William Veeder points out. “Victor is correct,” Veeder says, “Alphonse should explain, not simply dismiss. But just as unquestionably, the *magnitude* of Alphonse’s failure is relevant too. . . . What parent has not missed by at least this much the proper tone in a random moment?”²⁸ Or, perhaps Veeder concedes too much to Victor, as surely Alphonse has no obli-

gation to use his son's every choice of reading material as an opportunity for a lecture. Who would really want to be, or live with, a parent who did that? The real problem is not the reading material but the grown-up child's misguided belief that his parent had an obligation to frame that material for him. The missed lesson exemplifies not parental neglect but the unreasonableness of holding parents responsible for every dimension of a child's experience. The absurdity of Victor's expectation of his father, in the context of his self-absolution from responsibility for his actions, suggests that expectations of parental involvement, taken too far, deform the child's ability to develop his own judgment and sense of responsibility.

Like the other two narrators, the monster also has a story of how he became the man whose life he read. The monster encounters three sets of texts, each of which contributes to his education. He learns to read by overhearing Felix read aloud to Safie from Volney's *Ruins of Empires*. In contrast to Alphonse, Felix is a diligent interpreter. "I should not have understood the purport of this book," says the monster, "had not Felix, in reading it, given very minute explanations."²⁹ The effect, however, is no more beneficial to the monster than Alphonse's non-explanation to Victor, as the text inspires "strange feelings" in the monster.³⁰ "Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent," he begins to wonder, "yet so vicious and base?"³¹ As reading Agrippa was for Victor, listening to Felix's minute explanations of Volney is an epiphany for the monster. "For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellows, or even why there were laws and governments," he reports, "but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased, and I turned away with disgust and loathing."³² An experience of reading (via interpretive read-aloud) awakens the monster to the knowledge of good and evil and evokes his first impulse to murder. Through reading, he becomes Adam, but also Cain. Though Felix is not the monster's parent, he serves as the monster's tutor, *in loco parentis*, Jean-Jacques to the monster as to orphaned Emile. Parental influence, the monster's education demonstrates, can have unintended effects as disastrous as parental neglect.

Furthermore, says the monster, "The words induced me to turn to-

wards myself.”³³ In the light of what he has learned about humankind’s respect for power and wealth, which he contrasts with his own humble situation, the monster asks for the first time, “Was I then a monster?”³⁴ With these questions in mind, the monster turns to a second set of reading material, three books he finds in a lost “leathern portmanteau”: *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Plutarch’s Lives*.³⁵ There are connections between *Frankenstein* and each of these books, most obviously with *Paradise Lost*, a quote from which serves as the epigraph to the novel. The set’s inclusion of *Plutarch’s Lives*, whose significance is less obvious, gestures to Rousseau, or so I argue in this article’s conclusion.

Throughout *Frankenstein*, men become the men in books they read—alchemists, explorers, murderers. Rousseau says he became the men in Plutarch. By reading Plutarch, does the monster therefore become the same men Rousseau became? And, by the logic that if $A=C$ and $B=C$ then $A=B$, does this imply that the monster is, in some sense, Rousseau? He is also, of course, in another sense Young Werther, and the rebel angel, and the murderer of empire-builders, but there can be no uniform reading of this polysemous text. So he is not exactly Rousseau, but the connection has significance. Retooling Johnson’s insight that the monster serves as a “figure” for problems of textual representation rather than as an allegory for any particular person, we might describe the monster as a “figure” for the potentially monstrous effects of texts, especially Rousseau’s texts, on readers.

FORESIGHTED MOTHERS

There is one more reader to consider, the one who frames Rousseau’s life in her biographical essay by emphasizing his formation as a man through reading. What sort of man has that reader become? No man at all, of course. Rather, in *Frankenstein* as well as in that essay, Shelley tells readers why *not* to become the men—or women—whose lives we read. Like Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, *Frankenstein* challenges Rousseau’s fantasy of woman as self-abnegating mother, personified in *Emile* by Sophie, who lives through Emile and their children, and in Rousseau’s novel *La Nouvelle Heloise* by

Julie, who does Sophie one better by dying happy after jumping into Lac Lemann to save her drowning child. Become that woman, Rousseau suggests. What a monstrous idea!, retort Wollestonecraft and Shelley. Shelley's critique builds upon Wollestonecraft's, insofar as Shelley challenges Rousseau's retrogressive conception of femininity but also the entire conceit of discursively constructing idealized parents for readers to model themselves after.

To know what to make of Shelley's writing, we need to know what to make of *her* reading. When she wrote *Frankenstein*, Shelley had recently read Rousseau's *Confessions* and *Emile*, texts in which Rousseau establishes himself as writer-of-lives *par excellence*.³⁶ *Emile* is not usually considered autobiographical, though scholars have assigned it to a range of genres. It has been called a novel and a philosophical essay, and, because 18th century readers understood it to be offering advice on raising children, it also engendered the modern child-rearing manual, whether or not Rousseau meant it to. In an origin-story of *Emile* and *Emile*, character and book, Rousseau provides grounds for reading it as a hybrid of all these. "Someone of whom I know only the rank had the proposal to raise his son conveyed to me," Rousseau tells us.³⁷ He refused, he says, because "I feel my incapacity too much ever to accept such employment. ... Not in a condition to fulfill the most useful task, I will dare at least to attempt the easier one; following the example of so many others, I shall put my hand not to the work but to the pen."³⁸ Then follows another paradox: because he is incapable of raising a child, Rousseau will explain how to raise a child:

I have hence chosen to give myself an imaginary pupil, to hypothesize that I have the age, health, kinds of knowledge, and all the talent suitable for working at his education, for conducting him from the moment of his birth up to the one when, become a grown man, he will no longer have need of any guide other than himself.³⁹

This book, in other words, will imagine Jean-Jacques to be not the man he is, the man who eventually confesses to abandoning his five children, but an idealized father figure. It functions as a sort of fantasy autobiography, in which Rousseau becomes the imaginary parent whose life he writes.⁴⁰

Yet the addressee of *Emile* can no more become the educator Jean-Jacques than can Rousseau. In the Preface's first line, Rousseau tells the reader that "This collection of reflections and observations . . . was begun to gratify a good mother who knows how to think."⁴¹ In the third paragraph of Book I, he expands the audience to all mothers, addressing and defining the reader as follows: "It is to you that I address myself, tender and foresighted mother, who are capable of keeping the nascent shrub away from the highway and securing it from the impact of human opinions."⁴² *Emile* is addressed to women; if *you* the reader happen to be a man, this romance of a text puts you into a feminized subject position. Continuing in the second-person, Rousseau tells mothers to "Form an enclosure around your child's soul at an early date. Someone else can draw its circumference, but you alone must build that fence."⁴³ With this, Rousseau begins a book that sets higher expectations than any real parent could possibly meet. The ideal parent is to withdraw from society for 18 years in order to control all influences on the child. Or, at least, that is the situation that faces the tutor—and, eventually, Sophie, who takes his place of total responsibility in the next generation. In *Emile's* model of the ideal mother, her soul is also to be enclosed, tucked away like the monster in his shelter at the DeLacy's. The adult *Emile* does engage in other labor, giving him some leave from child-raising, but Sophie, given the excessive requirements of foresight, can only submerge herself in motherhood (presumably, excepting short breaks to attend to her appearance and flirt with *Emile*).

Rousseau's catastrophic ideal is with us still, running off in all directions. Contemporary idealizations of parental involvement, which are embedded in policy directives and worked into the common sense notion that "it all comes down to the parents," continue to hold parents responsible to an impossibly high degree for their children's futures. This appears to have intensified in recent decades. As Shelley forecast with Victor's condemnation of his father, the idea that parents should constantly engage with children's needs and interests has become a measure for judging fathers as well as mothers. Yet parents are no more able than ever to control the effects of reading material, other media, social encounters, and other environmental factors on their children, who fur-

thermore have unpredictable interests, talents, and reactions.

“Our first duty,” Shelley comments in her account of Rousseau’s “short-sighted” decision to abandon his children, “is to render those to whom we give birth wise, virtuous and happy, *as far as in us lies*.”⁴⁴ *Frankenstein* gives shape to what that caveat “as far as in us lies” entails. It recognizes the paramount importance of the parent-child relationship to the child’s education, but it also recognizes its limitations. So long as Rousseau’s ideal of self-abnegating parenthood continues to haunt us, as it does, Shelley’s critique of his suggestion that one person’s life-story can be collapsed into another’s—reader’s into writer’s, parent’s into child’s—remains radical and revelatory. Her novel demonstrates limitations inherent in parents’ education of their children and the catastrophic effects of denying those limitations, effects that the theorists, technocrats, and promoters of parental involvement are, like Victor Frankenstein facing his monster, loathe to accept.

1 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Brooklyn: Restless Books, 2016), 58.

2 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 58.

3 *Ibid.*, 60.

4 *Ibid.*, 66.

5 Mary Shelley, “Rousseau,” in *Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men of France* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and John Taylor, 1838), <https://archive.org/details/livesofmostemine02sheliala>.

6 Shelley, “Rousseau,” 131.

7 For biographical information, see Miranda Seymour, *Mary Shelley* (New York: Grove Press, 2000).

8 Barbara Johnson, *A Life with Mary Shelley* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 88.

9 On contemporary parenting discourse, see especially Judith Suissa and Stefan Ramackers, *The Claims of Parenting* (New York: Springer, 2012).

10 Alan Richardson, “From *Emile* to *Frankenstein*,” *European Romantic Review* 1, no. 2 (1991): 147–162. James O’Rourke, “Nothing More Unnatural: Mary Shelley’s Revision of Rousseau,” *ELH* 56, no. 3 (1989): 543–569, links *Frankenstein* to other texts by Rousseau but neglects *Emile*.

11 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 171. This phrase is repeated multiple times throughout the subsequent pages of the novel.

12 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 10.

13 Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago, IL: University of

Chicago Press, 1984).

14 *Frankenstein*, quoted and emphasis added by Johnson, *A Life with Mary Shelley*, 21.

15 Judith Butler, "Afterword," in Johnson, *A Life with Mary Shelley*, 41.

16 Johnson, *A Life with Mary Shelley*, 26.

17 Shelley, "Rousseau," 11.

18 Shelley, "Rousseau," 112, citing Rousseau's *Confessions*.

19 Ibid.

20 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 40.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 40–41.

26 Ibid., 14.

27 Ibid., 14–15.

28 William Veeder, "The Negative Oedipus," in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Frankenstein*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 118.

29 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 148.

30 Ibid., 149.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 149–150.

35 Ibid., 159.

36 Mary Shelley's journals include a list of what she read. See Paula Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, *The Journals of Mary Shelley: 1814–1844* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987).

37 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 14.

38 Rousseau, *Emile*, 14.

39 Rousseau, *Emile*, 50.

40 For readers keeping count, the third set of texts the monster reads are his own origin-story, Victor's scientific notes.

41 Rousseau, *Emile*, 33.

42 Ibid., 37–38.

43 Ibid., 38.

44 Shelley, "Rousseau," 132 (emphasis added).