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GOTHIC FICTION AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

BY RONALD PAULSON

In Chapter 5, Volume II, of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* Henry Tilney regales Catherine Morland with his version of the Gothic fantasy she loves to read. When she arrives at Northanger Abbey, he says, she will be taken by the housekeeper "along many gloomy passages, into an apartment never used since some cousin or kin died in it about twenty years before."¹ She will discover that the door has no lock, and shortly (a couple of nights later) there will be a violent storm. "Peals of thunder so loud as to seem to shake the edifice to its foundation will roll around the neighbouring mountains—and during the frightful gusts of wind which accompany it, you will probably think you discern (for your lamp is now extinguished) one part of the hanging more violently agitated than the rest." These details are punctuated by "Will not your heart sink within you?" The next step is to lift the tapestry, try the door found behind it, and proceed into "a small vaulted room." The walk through several such chambers reveals a dagger, some drops of blood, torture instruments, and an old cabinet in a secret drawer of which is found a roll of paper: "you seize it—it contains many sheets of manuscript—you hasten with the precious treasure into your own chamber, but scarcely have you been able to decipher 'Oh! thou—whomsoever thou mayst be, into whose hands these memoirs of the wretched Matilda may fall'—when your lamp suddenly expires in the socket, and leaves you in total darkness."

Certain elements of Ann Radcliffe's Gothic are here, including the passivity of the sensitive heroine, the labyrinthine passages and chambers through which she wanders, the violent storm, and the perusal of written documents that record experiences with which she never herself makes contact. Elsewhere in *Northanger Abbey*, the Gothic fiction is reflected in vocabulary—in, for example, Isabella's "amazing" or "inconceivable, incredible, impossible!" or Catherine's remark, "Udolpho [is] the nicest book in the world," to which Henry replies, "The nicest;—by which I suppose you mean the neatest. That must depend upon the binding" (p. 107). The adjective is just another sort of exaggeration, another expression of a point of view, a way of looking at the world as if it were a book.

Henry Tilney himself, we have learned in an earlier chapter (I, Chap. XIV), is a reader of history (“Yes, I am fond of history,” he says). Catherine reads history only “as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me” (p. 108), whereas from Gothic novels she presumably gains comfort. Henry, however, has his own Quixotic version of sensibility: he is a student of the Picturesque, believing that a “beautiful” sky does not signify good weather but a drawable picture. He instructs Catherine in these mysteries until she views “the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing”—and at length “voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of a landscape” (pp. 110-11).

At this point in the conversation, Tilney moves from the subject of the Picturesque to politics, “and from politics, it was an easy step to silence.” It is in this context—of the Gothic, history, the Picturesque, and politics—that Catherine remarks, “I have heard that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out of London. . . . more horrible than any thing we have met with yet”—by which of course she means the publication of a new Gothic novel. Miss Tilney, however, thinks she means a riot. It is left to Henry to explain the discrepancy between a new publication “in three duodecimo volumes, two hundred and seventy-six pages in each, with a frontispiece to the first,” and (in a fantasy parallel to the Gothic fantasy I have quoted above) “a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George’s Fields; the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood, a detachment of the 12th Light Dragoons . . .” and so on (pp. 112-113). This was written in 1797 or 1798 when Austen if not Tilney was thinking of history: the Gordon Riots of 1780 and the French Revolution of 1789.²

In the context of *Northanger Abbey* the irony is that the exaggeration of the sign falls short of the grim reality. But precisely *what* reality? The lies of the Thorpes and the fantasy of General Tilney as wife-murderer generated by the Gothic-infatuated Catherine turn out to signify, but not something close to the sign, not a Gothic but rather a worse, because more banal, more historical evil—one perhaps like the French Revolution itself: General Tilney’s abrupt dismissal of Catherine because he thinks she will interfere with his dynastic plans for Henry.³

In *Northanger Abbey* there is posited something we might call the real, or the thing itself, and then something else we can call the word, and Austen shows that they can only come together in for-

malized, conventionalized ways.⁴ We notice the difference between the Gothic fiction and history, but also the similarity. General Tilney is indeed the reality beneath Manfred, Montoni, and the other Gothic villains: a man concerned with property, heirs, and wealth; a man who tries unscrupulously to preserve his family and fortune against the incursions of a penniless outsider, who in fact does disrupt it. In the real world, the Gothic casts up (or is bettered by) the reality of a General Tilney or a French Revolution in which, in Burke's terms, penniless parvenues infiltrate the aristocratic family—or the royal family itself, ultimately breaking through its doors into the bedroom of the queen—and ravish the wife-mother-daughter.⁵ The principal elements are the same: the Gothic only supplies the metaphors and the gushing response of the safely distant spectator, who hears the storm (remembering perhaps the metaphors of natural upheaval—hurricanes and erupting volcanoes—that were immediately applied to the Revolution), notices the bloody daggers and racks, and reads—or starts to, until her candle is extinguished—a letter from an actual participant.

The Gothic did in fact serve as a metaphor with which some contemporaries in England tried to come to terms with what was happening across the Channel in the 1790s. The first Revolutionary emblem was the castle-prison, the Bastille and its destruction by an angry mob, which was fitted by Englishmen into the model of the Gordon Riots of nine years before. But if one way of dealing with the Revolution (in its earliest stages) was to see the castle-prison through the eyes of a sensitive young girl who responds to terror in the form of forced marriage and stolen property, another was to see it through the case history of her threatening oppressor, Horace Walpole's Manfred or M.G. Lewis' Ambrosio—the less comforting reality Austen was heralding in the historical phenomena of London riots. In Lewis' *The Monk* (1795) the two striking phenomena dramatized are first the explosion—the bursting out of his bonds—of a repressed monk imprisoned from earliest childhood in a monastery, with the havoc wreaked by his self-liberation (assisted by demonic forces) on his own family who were responsible for his being immured; and second, the blood-thirsty mob that lynches—literally grinds into a bloody pulp—the wicked prioress who has murdered those of her nuns who succumbed to sexual temptation. Both are cases of justification followed by horrible excess: Ambrosio deserves to break out and the mob is justified in punishing the evil prioress, but Ambrosio's liberty leads him to the shattering

of his vow of celibacy, to repression, murder, and rape not unlike the compulsion against which he was reacting; and the mob not only destroys the prioress but (recalling the massacres of September 1792) the whole community and the convent itself:

The incensed Populace, confounding the innocent with the guilty, had resolved to sacrifice all the Nuns of that order to their rage, and not to leave one stone of the building upon another. . . . They battered the walls, threw lighted torches in at the windows, and swore that by break of day not a Nun of St. Clare's order should be left alive. . . . The Rioters poured into the interior part of the Building, where they exercised their vengeance upon every thing which found itself in their passage. They broke the furniture into pieces, tore down the pictures, destroyed the reliques, and in their hatred of her Servant forgot all respect to the Saint. Some employed themselves in searching out the Nuns, Others in pulling down parts of the Convent, and Others again in setting fire to the pictures and furniture, which it contained. These Latter produced the most decisive desolation: Indeed the consequences of their action were more sudden, than themselves had expected or wished. The Flames rising from the burning piles caught part of the Building, which being old and dry, the conflagration spread with rapidity from room to room. The Walls were soon shaken by the devouring element: The Columns gave way: The Roofs came tumbling down upon the Rioters, and crushed many of them beneath their weight. Nothing was to be heard but shrieks and groans; the Convent was wrapped in flames, and the whole presented a scene of devastation and horror.⁶

The end, of course, as it appeared to Englishmen in 1794—remembering Thomas Paine's words ("From a small spark, kindled in America, a flame has arisen, not to be extinguished")⁷ and the imagery of light and fire associated with the Revolution—was the destruction of the revolutionaries themselves in the general collapse.

I. REBEL/TYRANT

I do not mean to suggest that Ann Radcliffe or Monk Lewis was producing propaganda either for or against the French Revolution. Lewis' treatment of the lynching scene, for example, is far removed from the morally clear-cut renderings of anti-clericalism exemplified by the *dramas monacals* popular in the theaters of Revolutionary Paris. In one of these plays—de Menuel's *Les Victimes cloîtrées*

of 1791, which Lewis saw, admired, and translated—the wretched prisoners held in the dungeons below a convent are finally rescued by a Republican mayor brandishing the *tricouleur*. Lewis exploits the dramatic resonances of the Revolution and its anti-clericalism, but simultaneously portrays the rioting mob as blood-thirsty, completely out of control, animal-like in its ferocity. The convent of St. Clare represents corruption, superstition, and repression, but its overthrowers, no more admirable than the tyrants, are capable of the same atrocities or worse. In the same way, many observers (conservative and otherwise) by 1793 saw the brutally oppressed masses of France usurping the tyrannical roles of their erstwhile oppressors.⁸

In his critical essay “Idée sur les romans” (1800) the Marquis de Sade, who considered *The Monk* superior to all other works of its kind, asserted that the bloody upheavals of the French Revolution had rendered everyday reality so horrific that contemporary writers necessarily had to invoke the supernatural and demonic realms for material which could still shock or startle their readers. I do not think there is any doubt that the popularity of Gothic fiction in the 1790s and well into the nineteenth century was due in part to the widespread anxieties and fears in Europe aroused by the turmoil in France finding a kind of sublimation or catharsis in tales of darkness, confusion, blood, and horror.

The Gothic, however, had existed from the 1760s onward, and we are talking about a particular development in the 1790s, a particular plot which was either at hand for writers to use in the light of the French Revolution, or was in some sense projected by the Revolution and borrowed by writers who may or may not have wished to express anything specifically about the troubles in France. As a descendent of Walpole’s Manfred, for example, Ambrosio has to be seen as a conflation of rebelling son and tyrant father. Manfred was the servant who murdered his master in order to usurp the family castle—or the castle of his father or older brother, in later versions of the story—and then sacrificed his own children to retain his property. But Ambrosio is notably unconcerned with property—only with liberty of a sexual sort. This is why he is sympathetic in a way that Manfred is not, even given Walpole’s assurances that Manfred is otherwise a great soul. Ambrosio’s story is of his insane, uncontrolled rush into freedom and, incidentally, of its consequences, which include repression of other people’s liberty for the end of self-gratification. In short, *The Monk* is about the act of liberation, whereas *The Castle of Otranto* was about a man’s at-

tempt to hold together his crumbling estate and cheat others of their rightful inheritance. One is a fable of revolution, the other of the *ancien régime*.

The earlier phase produced fictions that continued to be copied throughout the period of the Revolution. Not long after the notorious September Massacres, the *Monthly Review* attacked a Gothic novel called *The Castle of St. Vallery* in the following terms:

Of all the resources of invention, this, perhaps, is the most puerile, as it is certainly among the most unphilosophical. It contributes to keep alive that superstition which debilitates the mind, that ignorance which propagates terror, and that dread of invisible agency which makes inquiry criminal.⁹

The critic sees the Gothic practiced in this novel as the representation of tyranny which was a central contribution of the pre-1789 genre, and so an example of everything the French Enlightenment and Revolution was seeking to correct. He detects nothing of either the analysis of unrestrained energy that appears in some of Radcliffe's work of the 1790s or the representation of the energy of revolution itself in *The Monk*. Many such writers simply ignored the fact of the French Revolution. As John Garrett writes of one of these, Mary Meeke, her "conservatism was based on a belief that the 1789 revolution was some sort of aberration of history," and so she continued to portray France of the *ancien régime* as if nothing had happened.¹⁰

Other writers *were* concerned about the significance of the events in France. But the castle as prison was already implicit in *The Castle of Otranto* and Radcliffe's *Castles of Athlin and Dynbayne* (1789), and it may have been only this image and this frame of mind that made the Fall of the Bastille an automatic image of revolution for French as well as English writers. By the time *The Mysteries of Udolpho* appeared (1794), the castle, prison, tyrant, and sensitive young girl could no longer be presented naively; they had all been sophisticated by the events in France.

At this point another strand of novel, the novel of reform (the so-called "Jacobin" novel), joins the Gothic in the representation of tyranny and revolution. The Gothic tended to be the form adopted by those who were either against or merely intrigued by the Revolution, or by problems of freedom and compulsion. The reformers Godwin, Holcroft, Bage, and Inchbald are *for* the Revolution; they call their works "Things as they Are," "Man as he Is" or "Man as he is Not"; they avoid the Gothic and theatrical trappings Burke as-

sociated with the Revolution; they have a sometimes dismaying singleness of purpose and go straight to the contemporary Englishman, the General Tilney, illustrating Arthur Young's insistence that "The true judgment to be formed of the French revolution, must surely be gained, from an attentive consideration of the evils of the old government."¹¹ This was, of course, what the English Jacobins usually represented in their novels, tracts, and poems, for their real subject was not France but forms of compulsion in England.

Gothic and Jacobin novels had a similar ancestry in Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*; both show the family as a compulsive force on the children, in particular on the marriageable daughter or the young wife. The distinction is rather between a novel about the tyranny seen from the point of view of the helpless (most helpless because female) individual, and a novel about the rebel. William Godwin's *Things as They Are: or the Adventures of Caleb Williams* appeared just a year before *The Monk*, combining the two fictions in a more schematic, more coherent form. The relationship between Falkland and Caleb is the same explored by Inchbald and Holcroft between society the cruel hunter and the suffering individual, its victim. But by the time Godwin was writing, the French Terror had cast its shadow on libertarian dreams, and his work reflects that constant potential for simple inversion of the persecutor-persecuted relationship which events in Paris had so terribly exemplified.

In his initial, discursive response to the Revolution, *Political Justice* (1793), Godwin argued that "the great cause of humanity" is hindered by both the ancient tradition of Burkean thought (in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* of 1790) and by the "friends of innovation." He focuses on the second, bringing to bear Burke's own argument that "to dragoon men into the adoption of what we think right is an intolerable tyranny": the French have shown that to overthrow tyranny is to have to become greater tyrants themselves.¹² Godwin's own point is that the orderly process of growing philosophical awareness—a passive process—was dangerously interrupted by the Revolution, and perhaps directed into the wrong channels. His second point is that "Coercion first annihilates the understanding of the subject upon whom it is exercised, and then of him who employs it." For Caleb Williams, in his way, becomes as much a persecutor (and ultimately a murderer) as his master—and is eventually brought to commit similar crimes through an equally

obsessive concern to protect the “honour” he no longer possesses.

The potentially invertible relationship in *Caleb Williams* is between two wholly isolated beings who play out their equally agonizing parts in a series of physical and psychological hunts and flights, wherein they repeatedly exchange the roles of persecutor and victim, hunter and hunted. Their final miserable realization of the simultaneity of both roles in their natures (each having previously viewed only the other as the real persecutor) results in the climactic moment in the novel when Falkland collapses into Caleb’s arms and confesses to the murder of Tyrrel—and when Caleb realizes that his own awakened sense of guilt and responsibility must deny him the possibility of ever receiving any happiness from his long-desired liberty.

Both *The Monk* and *Caleb Williams* offer embryonic versions of the titanic Romantic hero who comes into being with the blurring of the old black-white morality of earlier Gothic fiction.¹³ This figure is in part characterized, as was the French Revolution, by the appalling ease with which his nature could be inverted, either by assuming the vices of the tyrant he has overthrown, or by a simple shift of moral perspective. Ambrosio seen from one point of view is the cruel hypocrite, matricide, and incestuous rapist, who lets no barrier stand between him and the fulfillment of his lust; but from another he is the helpless, passive victim of his repressive environment and of Satanic persecution, rendered vulnerable by his miseducation, seduced by a demon, tricked into ravishing his own sister, driven to sell his soul when an earthly reprieve is at hand, and finally betrayed and destroyed by the Arch-Fiend.

II. CROWD AND CABAL

Some of the ambivalent feelings we have registered to Ambrosio, Caleb, and the crowd that destroys the prioress and her convent can be sensed in the meditations of a first-hand witness to the early stages of the Revolution. Arthur Young argues that release—the violent, destructive explosion of release Lewis depicts in Ambrosio—was a consequence of oppression, signifying only in relation to that original oppression. He asks whether it is “really the people to whom we are to impute” the excesses they are committing:

—Or to their oppressors who had kept them so long in a state of bondage? He who chooses to be served by slaves, and by ill-treated slaves, must know that he holds both his property and life

by a tenure far different from those who prefer the service of well treated freemen; and he who dines to the music of groaning sufferers, must not, in the moment of insurrection, complain that his daughters are ravished, and then destroyed; and that his sons throats are cut.¹⁴

The fact that neither Lewis nor Godwin stresses the cruelty of the masters of Ambrosio and Caleb does not alter the general point that the revolt is understood only in terms of the oppression against which it acts. As to the crowd, which does react against specific and monstrous cruelty on the part of the prioress (who, after all, is a minor character in the novel), Young admonishes: "Let it be remembered that the populace in no country ever use power with moderation; excess is inherent in their aggregate constitution. . . ." (p. 516).

From the Fall of the Bastille to the September Massacres, and to the *levée en masse* and Napoleon's armies, this crowd is in many ways the central phenomenon of the Revolution. The crowd, with the related terms "natural sovereignty" and "General Will" (or Burke's "swinish multitude"), was among the most ambiguous concepts to arise from the Revolution. Ambrosio, it should be recalled, was at the very outset presented as a spell-binding orator, the master of the crowd that later proves beyond mastering. The crowd, the *mobile vulgus*, was an image that was ready to hand in the literature of conservative Anglo-Catholic royalists like Dryden and Swift, but materialized by the Gordon Riots and the actual events in France. With this past history, and with its own development in France, the crowd merged with the conflicting or overlapping fictions of, on the one hand, the cabal or small secret society that governs the crowd and determines events, or, on the other, the single great man who expresses in himself the General Will.

The disturbances in Ireland, for example, the *Times* of 22 February 1793 reported, "arise from the pure wantonness of a set of desperadoes called Defenders . . . encouraged and abetted by a secret junto, that like the French Jacobins, wish to throw all government into confusion. . . ." The largest such fiction was the one woven by the Abbé Augustin de Barruel, who argued that the *illuminati* masterminded the whole Revolution. As J. M. Roberts has written in his *Mythology of the Secret Societies*:

Educated and conservative men raised in the tradition of Christianity, with its stress on individual responsibility and the independence of the will, found conspiracy theories plausible as an explanation of such changes: it must have come about, they thought, because somebody planned it so.¹⁵

Such myths as plots of the Freemasons, *philosophes*, and *illuminati* were “an attempt to impose some sort of order on the bewildering variety of changes which suddenly showered upon Europe with the Revolution and its aftermath.” The assumption of individual agency (as opposed to the more popular modern explanation of social and economic determinism) is evident not only in the allegorizations of revolution as the actions of a single man—an Ambrosio—but also in the comforting retreat to Satanic responsibility in the Miltonic fictions of rebellion in heaven and in the Garden of Eden—in Rosario-Matilda, the Devil who in fact determines all the events that Ambrosio seemed responsible for.

The crowd could thus mean either complete uncontrol of unruly passions or the carrying out of the designs of a single man or a very small group of schemers—or even diabolic possession or inspiration. The historical villain (as in many of the theories Barruel collects) is the Duc d’Orléans type (Philippe Egalité), the cadet who wants power himself and therefore topples the rightful older brother or cousin by masterminding a plot that moves the crowd (Satan in heaven, jealous of the raising of his “brother” Christ, or Schedoni in Radcliffe’s *The Italian*), and is himself swept away by the tempest he has unleashed. The force then becomes the Jacobin Club or a Robespierre, who eventually loses his own head, and ultimately a Napoleon.

General Tilney (or Montoni or Schedoni) and the rioters are, of course, polarities: one concerned with the preservation and the other with the destruction of property, but both with its appropriation. Tilney is the malign individual, the Radcliffe villain; the rioters, something she only hints at in the vague figures of the sexually threatening soldiers of Montoni whom Emily fears (in this sense related to Burke’s mob that threatens Marie Antoinette), are mere misdirected action, chance, the natural force of a crowd—in some ways even more terrifying to contemplate. Both, however, were historical phenomena, not exactly unthinkable before 1789, but largely Gothic fantasies or satiric exaggerations. Taken together, however, they represent the two chief explanations offered for the phenomenon of the Revolution by conservative theorists, the spokesmen of counter-revolution.

The sense of unresolved mystery that was one aspect of the Gothic fiction of Walpole, Clara Reeve, and Radcliffe also fitted the way many contemporaries “read” the Revolution. The feeling the reader has in Gothic fiction is of never knowing exactly where he is, where he is going, or what is happening. This is a feeling which

corresponds to the puzzlement of the protagonist too, whether a passive Emily or an active plotter like Ambrosio. The Gothic describes a situation in which no one can understand or fathom anyone else's motives or actions. The narrative structure the Gothic inherited, and carried to its greatest degree of subtlety in Radcliffe's novels (and of formal innovation in Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*), was one involving a theme of communication, the unresolved difficulty of understanding actions; this was expressed in the aposiopesis of Sterne's and Mackenzie's novels, in the authentic manuscript lost in gun-wadding or hair curlers, the resort to typographical excesses, and the alternative accounts that leave the reader as uncertain of the responsibility for the protagonist's actions as the protagonist himself. This is, of course, also a feature of the sublime style, "where half is left out to be supplied by the hearer"—and so a logical and syntactical obscurity joins revolution and sublimity.¹⁶

Behind all of this obscurity, however, is the elaborate plot, masterminded but slipping out of control, which involves the overthrow of a property owner. When the Revolution itself came, and as it progressed, it was precisely this inability to make out the events on a day-to-day basis, but with the suspicion of personal skulduggery beneath each new changing-hands of property, that made the Gothic novel a roughly equivalent narrative form. But this is not to say that the Revolution produced no plot structures of its own. There was a discernible scenario that began with the Fall of the Bastille and progressed to the march on and back from Versailles, the flight to Varennes, the September Massacres, the Terror, Thermidore, Brumaire, and so on. Even Waterloo was followed, for Englishmen, by Peterloo, an ironic, domestic extension. Depending on what stage one looked back from, he had a different structure, though it was increasingly colored on the dark side by the Terror, by the further disillusionment of the Directory, and by the threat to national security of the Empire.

Behind all of this was a new sense of history, of what could or should happen in history, and what history was in fact about. From being about the kings, it became, in certain ways, about larger groups of subjects and their attempts to come to terms with, or create a new order from, the disorder consequent upon the overthrow of the old established order. The process was one of evolution or revolution, probably of both, involving circular motion but in a spiral that was either ascending or descending, as Caleb over-

throws while at the same time becoming Falkland, as Orc overthrows and then becomes Urizen, and so on. The standard features that emerged were the rebellion itself with the enormous possibilities and hopes it opened up; this was followed by a stage of delusion, dangerous and unforeseen consequences, and disillusionment.¹⁷

III. SENTIMENTAL RESPONSE AND SEXUAL ENERGY

It is difficult not to agree with Nelson Smith that in many ways Emily St. Aubert is used by Radcliffe in precisely the critical way Jane Austen uses Catherine Morland.¹⁸ The (remote) potential of Ambrosio in Emily is broached at the beginning in M. St. Aubert's death-bed warning to her, "do not indulge in the pride of fine feeling" or "ill-governed sensibility," which is dangerous to its possessor and to others as well; and it is materialized at the end in the nun Agnes' expostulation to Emily based on her own slip from sentiment into sexual passion. In general, however, Radcliffe contrasts Emily's gentle sentiments in Udolpho with the "fierce and terrible passions . . . which so often agitated the inhabitants of this edifice," "those mysterious workings, that rouse the elements of man's nature into tempest." Emily's, she assures us,

was a silent anguish, weeping, yet enduring; not the *wild energy of passion, inflaming imagination, bearing down the barriers of reason and living in a world of its own.*¹⁹

The terms I have emphasized are precisely those applied by contemporaries like Burke to the Revolution. The deeply intuitive feelings of Emily are the quiet English virtues of the spectator of sublime overthrow across the Channel; the "wild energy" of Montoni is what Burke associates with the French rabble. Both derive from the sentimental novel, but one is the delicate sensibility of a Toby Shandy or a Harley, the friendship and compassion that can join parental duty, justice, and prudence; the other is the dangerous love of a Clarissa, even the benevolence of a Charles Surface, and the "Jacobin" view that "It is the quality of feeling that sanctifies the marriage; not, as the anti-Jacobins were to have it, the other way around."²⁰

Emily is therefore, as Mary Poovey has argued, the susceptible young spectator who *might* be seduced by the real center of energy into becoming another Agnes; and this center of energy, Montoni, is based on a need to dominate that draws on the conventions of both Gothic and revolutionary mythology.²¹ There is, in short, a

distinction between misperception—believing a General Tilney to be a Montoni, or (to take Blake’s contemporary case, in “The Tyger”) a lamb to be a tiger, a gallant French Revolution to be a bloodthirsty uprising or vice versa—and exploitation either of the sensitive soul by others or of others by the sensitive soul expanded until out of control. Emily is obviously the former, but this is because she never allows herself to slip completely out of control, and because Radcliffe has already given us this rebel figure in the male villain, whose motives are unrelievedly bad.

If Radcliffe produces a fiction about a spectator of revolutionary activity who can be confused by her experience, whose response though virtuous is both ambivalent and liable to the temptation to misperceive, then Lewis’ *Monk* reproduces the exhilarating but ultimately depressing experience of the revolutionary himself.

I have already rehearsed the trajectory of Ambrosio’s explosion of energy. Although this pact with the Devil introduces the Faustus story, it is significant that Ambrosio does not want the intellectual, spiritual, or specifically political power we associate with the Enlightenment. He wants only sexual power. The world of the Enlightenment no longer represented intellectual knowledge; the Revolution had, in Burke’s and Lewis’ terms, exposed the reality under Enlightenment to be unrestrained sexual “knowledge.” Faustus’ Mephistopheles becomes Ambrosio’s Matilda. It is Ambrosio’s desire for her that drags him into the world of Lucifer, and his lust for Antonia that draws him further into the Satanic power. At the same time, Raymond’s violent love for Agnes permits the supernatural to penetrate the human world, for it is as he waits to elope with her and consummate his desire that the Bleeding Nun appears to him in her place. In *The Monk* it is the unleashing of repressed sexual desires that shatters the barrier between the natural and supernatural worlds.

Caleb Williams is also a Faustus figure, who describes his “crime” or “offence” as a “a mistaken thirst of knowledge.”²² Although he is, unlike Ambrosio, in pursuit of an intellectual goal—knowledge of his master’s crime—he describes his obsessive quest in sexual terms. Such words as “pleasures,” “pains,” “perpetual stimulus,” “insatiable desire,” “satisfaction,” and “gratification”—all directed to the subject of his quest—have sexual resonances. When he realizes that Falkland is the murderer, he says “My blood boiled within me”—as we are told that Ambrosio’s “blood boiled in his veins” when he looked upon Rosario-Matilda’s bosom. “I was

conscious to a kind of rapture for which I could not account,” Caleb goes on. “I was solemn, yet full of rapid emotion, burning with indignation and energy.” Based on Godwin’s brilliant insight into the nature of the servant-master relationship for both parties, Caleb’s almost sexual curiosity releases all the darker potentialities of Falkland’s inner self, and lays Caleb open to inhuman pursuit and persecution, as well as to the corruption of his own nature.

Man searches for body equivalents for any important, unexplained phenomenon, from unordered nature to economics to revolutions. But there is probably some connection between love and revolution in the political experience itself—or at least in the mind (or vocabulary) of the person who writes about revolution, who is imaginatively recreating the experience. “Revolution is the sex of politics,” as H. L. Mencken said. But if at the outset the most common metaphor was of sexual release—whether spring’s bursting buds (in Paine’s *Rights of Man*) or Blake’s Orc breaking his chains and raping his tyrant-captor’s daughter—by the end it had become images of parturition, of giving birth to creatures like Victor Frankenstein’s, regarded as (depending on the point of view) a victim or a monster.

IV. THE RETROSPECT OF *FRANKENSTEIN*

The plot of *The Monk* can be seen as a version of the revolutionary scenario as far as the Terror; Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818, the year in which *Northanger Abbey* was finally published) was to some extent a retrospect on the whole process through Waterloo, with the Enlightenment-created monster leaving behind its wake of terror and destruction across France and Europe, partly because it had been disowned and misunderstood and partly because it was created unnaturally by reason rather than love in the instinctive relationships of the Burkean family.

One aspect of Shelley’s fable we can see by recalling her remarks, on her elopement journey across France in July 1814, on the swath of devastation cut across France by the Russian troops following Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow.²³ The Cossack terror was in some sense the final consequence of Napoleon’s—ultimately the French Revolution’s, or the French *ancien régime*’s—Frankenstein monster. In this crescendo of destruction can be read an allegory of the French Revolution, the attempt to *recreate* man and the disillusionment and terror that followed, not ending until Waterloo in

1815, the year between the Shelleys' two trips to Switzerland.²⁴

We also know that Mary Shelley read in 1815 the Abbé Barruel's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme* (1797-98) as well as her mother Mary Wollstonecraft's *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794). In the first of these, Barruel uncovered sources of the Revolution in the occult practices of the Freemasons, the *illuminati*, and the Albigenians, Manicheans, and Assassins.²⁵ Victor Frankenstein initially apprentices himself spiritually to Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus, and he goes off to college at Ingoldstadt. Munich or Heidelberg would have been closer to his home in Geneva, but Ingoldstadt (as Shelley knew from the *Histoire du jacobinisme*) was where Adam Weishaupt, the symbolic arch-demon of revolutionary thought, founded the Bavarian *illuminati* in 1776, and from this secret society supposedly grew the French Revolution. The *illuminati* were sworn to further knowledge for the betterment of mankind, no matter what the cost or the means. The words of M. Waldman to Victor could have been Weishaupt's own: "These [Agrippa and Paracelsus] were men to whose indefatigable zeal modern philosophers were indebted for most of the foundations of their knowledge. . . . The labours of men of genius, however erroneously directed, scarcely ever fail in ultimately turning to the solid advantage of mankind."²⁶

We can feel the pervasive influence of Barruel, who saw the essence of the *illuminati* and of the Revolution he believed they propagated to be atheism, universal anarchy, and the destruction of property.²⁷ The three elements of the Frankenstein syndrome are the aim to replace God the creator with man, to destroy the family and its ties, and to destroy property and human life. Barruel offered an extremely symbolic explanation (down to the detection of the Masonic triangle in the guillotine blade, invented by Dr. Guillotine, a Freemason), one that could be called Gothic in its bias toward historical explanations and extreme causality, on devious and secret plotting, and on pseudo-science and occult philosophy.

The reading of her mother's book on "the Origin and Progress" of the Revolution was for Mary Shelley a way of connecting the personal and the public reality of history with Barruel's Gothic fictions of origins. Mary Wollstonecraft, writing about this "revolution, the most important that has ever been recorded in the annals of man," made it very clear that its cruelties were the consequence of the *ancien régime*. From the court's imprisonment of representatives to

the assembly, the troops' crushing public demonstrations, and the king's substituting retaliation for justice, she says,

we may date the commencement of those butcheries, which have brought on that devoted country so many dreadful calamities, by teaching the people to avenge themselves with blood!²⁸

The origin of the Revolutionary bloodbath was in the cruelty of the tyrant himself, much as Arthur Young and Godwin had asserted. Percy Shelley offered the same explanation in his preface to *The Revolt of Islam* (1817-18): "Can he who the day before was a trampled slave suddenly become liberal-minded, forbearing, and independent?" And he wrote in his review of *Frankenstein*:

Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked. Requite affection with scorn:—let one being be selected, for whatever cause, as the refuse of his kind—divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations—malevolence and selfishness.²⁹

If these texts were the ambience, the immediate experience behind Mary Shelley's writing was the trauma of her giving birth to a dead child in February or March 1815 and the memory of her own birth, which had killed her mother nearly twenty years before in 1797.³⁰ Birth trauma is one of the central concerns of *Frankenstein*, as it was metaphorically of Wollstonecraft's history of the "Origin and Progress" of the Revolution, and in Mary Shelley the points of view of the parent and child merged.

Private and public life first joined in Mary Wollstonecraft's love affair with Gilbert Imlay (as it had also in Wordsworth's with Annette Vallon), their idyll in Paris during the Revolution, and his betrayal of her at the same time the Revolution itself betrayed her. The result was the commonplace similitude between revolution and sexual love. Wollstonecraft's recovery was through her relationship with Godwin, and this time the offspring was Mary Shelley—in whose birth (the symbolic joining of these two revolutionary spirits) the mother died, leaving Mary with the trauma of seeming rejection by the mother-creator, as well as by the father who held her responsible for the death of his beloved wife. At the age of four she was further rejected by her father when he took Mary Jane Clairmont as his second wife.³¹ Now to the guilt of having killed her mother was added the birth and death of her own first child, and the birth in January 1816 of her second (who survived until 1819), not long before the trip to Switzerland, and at a time

when she was seeing the French Revolution in its final stage: political reaction following the rejected and rejecting Revolution.

The construction of the monster, as of the makeshift, nonorganic family, is the final aspect of the *Frankenstein* plot. Burke's conception of the state as organic and of the Revolution as a family convulsed was joined by Mary Shelley with the fact of her own "family," the haphazard one in which she grew up with other children of different mothers and with a stepmother.³² This creation of a family of children by some method other than natural, organic procreation within a single love relationship is projected onto the Frankenstein family, a family assembled by the additive process of adoptions and the like, and so to Victor's own creation of a child without parents or sexual love. The autochthonous family, made up of bits and pieces, a substitute for organic growth, begins with Victor's father and leads to his own putting together of his creature from a variety of different bodies. The construction of the "child" is then followed by its rejection by its "father"; and then by the creature's desire for a proper mate in order to carry on its own line, the "father's" refusal, and the creature-son's systematic destruction of the father's whole family—including his bride (who would have been the mother had there been one).

The conventional tyrannical family (Turkish in this case) is contrasted with the new rational family Frankenstein projects:

A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs.

(p. 49)

Frankenstein predictably sees himself as the father who "deserves" the gratitude of his children more "completely" than any other, and in saying so becomes the tyrant himself. As an allegory of the French Revolution, his experiment corresponds to the possibility of ignoring the paternal (and maternal) power by constructing one's own offspring out of sheer reason, but it shows that the creator is still only a "father" and his creation another "son" locked in the same love-tyranny relationship Mary's own father had described so strikingly in *Caleb Williams* (another book Mary had reread as she undertook her novel).

We have by now distinguished two phases of the Revolution, one seen from the point of view of a lover, and the other from the point of view of the child of the union. These are not as distinct as they

might at first appear. The first is an Oedipus, or, in Blake's terms, the Orc who becomes a rival to his father; and the second is Electra or Polyneices, the child of the incestuous union, the offspring of the Revolution. It is precisely this juxtaposition (or conflation) of points of view, including the parallel one of the author (expressed again, looking back from the Preface of 1831, when she says, "And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper"), that distinguishes *Frankenstein* as a fictional work.

The description of the creator and his creature looking at each other in turn (pp. 52, 53), and thereafter reporting the same scenes from their respective viewpoints, inevitably evokes the passage in Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) in which, as an example of how the sublime operates, Milton's Satan and Death are described as if facing each other, each seeing the other from his own point of view, as mutual challengers.³³ There is, of course, no mother in the case of *Frankenstein's* creature, and so no Sin of the Satan-Sin-Death paradigm, because Victor thinks he can create out of himself alone (as Satan originally did Sin). But the mutually destructive conflict proves to be over the creature's mate, and the victim is Victor's own mate. As in Burke's example, Sin is the invisible third party standing between the father and son.

The world seen by creator and creature is constructed of the most familiar image patterns of the Revolution, beginning with Barruel's *illuminati*. The word *illuminé* was, of course, radically ambiguous, "used by people in diametrically opposed ways" as reason and as revelation, as right and as wrong, as royal authority and as human liberty.³⁴ When Victor reads Cornelius Agrippa, he finds that a "new light seemed to dawn upon my mind" (p. 32), and this is the familiar illumination which (in terms similar to Paine's) becomes fire in the thunderstorm that first suggests the idea of how to galvanize inert matter into life:

on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump. When we visited it the next morning, we found the tree shattered in a singular manner. It was not splintered by the shock, but entirely reduced to thin ribbands of wood. I never beheld any thing so utterly destroyed.

(p. 35)

This description of lightning-electricity as both life-giving and utterly destructive, aimed at "an old and beautiful oak," is a final echo

of the vocabulary in which Shelley's mother and her opponents (in particular Burke with his British oak) had described the Revolution. The effect is that of the crowd's vengeance in *The Monk*, but the image leads into the Promethean associations of light and fire, benevolence and destruction. (Napoleon was associated with Prometheus by Byron and by his own propaganda machine.)

The creature is born into light, so strong that "I was obliged to shut my eyes" (p. 97), and darkness and light alternate as he closes and opens his eyes. While light allows him to move about and "wander on at liberty," it leads him to seek relief in its opposite: "The light became more and more oppressive to me; and, the heat wearying me as I walked, I sought a place where I could receive shade" (p. 98). His enlightenment-oriented master, we recall, was given to remarking that "Darkness had no effect upon my fancy" (p. 47).

As the creature's eyes become "accustomed to the light" so that he can now "perceive objects in their right forms," he comes upon light in its next higher incarnation, fire:

I . . . was overcome with delight at the warmth I experienced from it. In my joy I thrust my hand into the live embers, but quickly drew it out again with a cry of pain. How strange, I thought, that the same cause should produce such opposite effects.

(p. 99)

Frankenstein's monster runs the gamut of the associations of birth, springtime, and the heat that becomes destructive fire, found in so many of the writings of the Revolution. His birth is described as a kind of emergence into spring, and his progress is to the beautiful spot of the cottagers, from winter to spring (p. 111), followed by the disastrous confrontation and dispersal of himself and the foster-family he had tried to join. Victor describes his own breakdown following the "birth" of the monster, and then his recovery, in terms of the seasons:

I perceived that the fallen leaves had disappeared, and that the young buds were shooting forth from the trees that shaded my window. It was a divine spring; and the season contributed greatly to my convalescence. I felt also sentiments of joy and affection revive in my bosom. . . .

(p. 57)

The irony is that Victor fails to recognize the connection between his production of the monster and this rebirth and the conventional

imagery going back to Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft of the Revolution seen from a positive point of view as the beautiful. Victor sees it instead as the terrible, the sublime, the threatening, and the tragedy of his reaction is that, like Burke, he turns the creature into the sublime destructive force he reads into his aesthetic response to it—when his response presumably should rather have been that of a sensitive parent. What is needed is the beautiful love of a mother, not the sublime fear of a father.

The warmth of spring ends, however, as destructive and then self-destructive fire. The creature tells us that he is going to end his life on a funeral pyre at the North Pole:

Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace. . . .

(p. 221)

And having said this, he makes off on his ice raft, and the novel ends: “He was soon borne away by the waves, and lost in darkness and distance”—a final sublime object.

It seems not possible to write about the Revolution and avoid the aesthetic categories first introduced by Burke in his *Reflections*. Victor has made the creature out of beautiful features, but the scale is too large and the juxtapositions ugly—and the whole inspires terror. Thus, as Victor says when he sees the creature for the first time instilled with life: “the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (p. 53). And the beautiful cottage, its surrounding scenery, “the perfect forms of my cottagers” (as the creature says), and Safie with her “countenance of angelic beauty and expression” (pp. 109, 112), are set against the looming presence of the monster which destroys the *locus amoenus* and disperses this, another family.

Mary Shelley is summing up all we have seen about the Gothic as a fiction in which to describe the French Revolution. The positive representations of the Revolution tended to stop—insofar as they remained positive and did not move on to the next phase of response—at the burst of sexual energy, which was creation. Beyond that, Paine, Price, Blake, and others suggested a vaguely pastoral life, an ideal of a Golden Age of leisure defended by Godwin and predictably attacked by Malthus, Crabbe, and Burke. The negative, dark side of the Revolution thus not unnaturally tended to

fall into the fiction of the Gothic; and this suited Burke's way of thinking in his *Reflections*, for precisely what was being destroyed was the beautiful, passive, feminine, chivalric, pastoral world that is embodied in the maiden fleeing down dimly lit, tortuous corridors, followed by the active, masculine, sublimely aggressive force of the French revolutionaries who threatened the queen and abducted, humiliated, and overthrew her husband, the father of his people, the king.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London, 1923), V, 158-60. Page numbers cited in the text refer to this edition.

² Part of the context of the passage is the sort of response a revolutionary sympathizer like Richard Brinsley Sheridan made to the rumors being bandied about. He tells his fellow Members of Parliament with mock seriousness "that there was a plan for taking the Tower by the French; after which, the whole of our constitution was to be overturned, and the Royal Family were to be murdered. At the head of this plot was to be placed that most execrable character, Marat. . . ." There were also to be attempts to poison the New River (which supplied London with its water). But the insurrection in fact comes down to the planting of a Liberty Tree by some schoolboys: "Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane," as Sheridan concludes (*Speeches*, 1816, III, 89-91).

³ As John K. Mathison put it: "From the gothic novels, Catherine had come to believe in the possibility of cruelty, violence, and crime that her sheltered life had shown no signs of" ("*Northanger Abbey* and Jane Austen's Conception of the Value of Fiction," *ELH*, 24 [1957], 149). See also Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford, 1975), for an interesting account of the background of Austen's novels in anti-Jacobin fiction.

⁴ At one point Henry tells Catherine, "I consider a country-dance as an emblem of marriage," and fills in the analogies. "But they are such very different things!—" says Catherine, the reader of Gothic romances (p. 76). Tilney extends the comparison to other details, and we remember that his view is through most of the novel normative of the real as opposed to Gothic fictions. "[B]ut still they are so very different," Catherine, however, responds again; and indeed they are. Both Henry and Catherine are right. They are talking about the relation of the sign or the representation to reality—which finds a particularly interesting case in the French Revolution.

⁵ See Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790); and Paulson, "Burke's Sublime and the Representation of Revolution," in *Culture and Politics from Puritanism to the Enlightenment*, ed. Perez Zagorin (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), pp. 241-70.

⁶ *The Monk*, ed. Howard Anderson (London, 1973), pp. 357-58.

⁷ *Rights of Man*, Pt. II (1792; rpt. London, 1969), p. 232. On the imagery of light, to which we shall return, see Paulson, "Turner's Graffiti: The Sun and its Glosses," in *Images of Romanticism*, ed. Karl Kroeber and William Walling (New Haven, 1978), pp. 171-83.

⁸ The caricaturist James Gillray presents equally undifferentiated images (as to good and evil) of Louis XVI and the canaille who abuse him (*French Democrats surprising the Royal Family*, 27 June 1792).

⁹ Quoted by Robert D. Mayo in his Introduction to George Moore's *Grasville Abbey* (1797; Arno Press ed., 1974), p. x.

¹⁰ Introduction to *Count St. Blancard* by Mary Meeke (1795; Arno Press ed., 1977), p. xv.

¹¹ *Travels during the Years 1787, 1788, and 1789* (Dublin, 1793), II, 517. For the Jacobin novel, see Butler, pp. 29-87; Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel 1780-1805* (Oxford, 1976); and Paulson's review of Kelly in *Blake: An Illustrated Quarterly*, 11 (1978), 293-97.

¹² *Political Justice*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (London, 1978), pp. 262, 639; see also pp. 639-41.

¹³ See Robert C. Hume, "Gothic Versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel," *PMLA*, 84 (1969), 282-90.

¹⁴ Young, *Travels*, II, 515, 516.

¹⁵ *Mythology of the Secret Societies* (London, 1972), p. 10 (on Barruel in general, see pp. 188-202); and Barruel, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme* (1797-98; English eds. also published in 1797-98).

¹⁶ Abraham Cowley, quoted by Martin Price, "The Sublime Poem: Pictures and Powers," *Yale Review*, 58 (1969), 206.

¹⁷ A related, more specific progression, which was one way of reading the events, began with moderate leaders who had intended no violence or mass upheaval but were swept away by the movement they unleashed. The "moderates," by upsetting the existing order, released other forces of society: in Paris, the mob, the Jacobin clubs, and the politicians who wanted equality of taxes and representation; in the country, the naturally conservative peasants who rose in agrarian revolt.

¹⁸ Nelson C. Smith, "Sense, Sensibility and Ann Radcliffe," *SEL*, 12 (1973), 577-90. See also Mary Poovey, "Ideology in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*," *Criticism*, 21 (1979), 307-30.

¹⁹ *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London, 1966), p. 329.

²⁰ Butler, p. 28. Sheridan's indulgence toward Charles Surface in *School for Scandal* was attacked by Henry Mackenzie in *Anecdotes and Egotisms*, ed. H. W. Thompson (London, 1927), p. 204, and by the anti-Jacobins Robert Bisset (*Douglas, or the Highlander* [1801], III, 111-14) and Charles Lucas (*The Infernal Quixote* [1801], I, 252).

²¹ Poovey, *passim*.

²² *Caleb Williams*, ed. David McCracken (London, 1970), p. 133.

²³ *History of a Six Weeks' Tour through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland* (1817), pp. 19-24.

²⁴ We should also recall Mary Shelley's account of her visit to Versailles, and of seeing a particular boar hunt illustrated in a book in the royal library, and of reading into it the origin of a chain of events that had only now come to an end in the prostration of France (*Mary Shelley's Journal*, ed. Frederick L. Jones [Norman, OK, 1947], I, 63).

²⁵ Tracing the Assassins through Gibbon and his sources, Mary then read Louis Maimbourg's *History of Dualism*. She seems to have been interested in 1815 and 1816 in the relationship of Enlightenment thought to the interest in occultism and psychic phenomena that immediately preceded the Revolution (*Mary Shelley's Journal*, I, 19).

²⁶ *Frankenstein*, ed. James Rieger (New York, 1974), pp. 42-43. Page numbers cited in the text refer to this edition, which is based on the first edition of 1818.

²⁷ Roberts, *Mythology of the Secret Societies*, p. 196. See also Clarke Garrett, "Joseph Priestley, the Millenium, and the French Revolution," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 34 (1973), 51-66.

²⁸ *Historical and Moral View*, pp. 56-57.

²⁹ *The Complete Poetical Works of Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (Oxford, 1904), p. 36; *Shelley's Prose*, ed. D. L. Clark (Albuquerque, 1966), pp. 307-8.

³⁰ See Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (New York, 1976), pp. 91-100; *Mary Shelley's Journal*, I, 40-41; and her letter to T. J. Hogg, 6 March 1815, in *Shelley and his Circle*, ed. K. N. Cameron and D. H. Reiman (Cambridge, MA, 1970), III, 453.

³¹ She later recalled the "excessive and romantic attachment to my father," which she said the second Mrs. Goodwin "had discovered" (*The Letters of Mary W. Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones [Norman, OK, 1944], II, 88).

³² Godwin's second wife, Mary Jane Clairmont, was a widow with two children of her own. Additional members of the "family" were Fanny Imlay (Mary Wollstonecraft's illegitimate child by Gilbert Imlay) and William, the child of Godwin's second marriage.

³³ Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, Pt. II, Sect. III-IV, ed. J. T. Boulton (London, 1958), pp. 58-64.

³⁴ Roberts, p. 134.