SHELLEY DISTRIBUTED: MATERIAL ASSEMBLAGES OF
FRANKENSTEIN, MARY, AND PERCY

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

By

Tess A. Henthorne, B.A.

Washington, D.C.
April 6, 2018
This thesis investigates theories of matter, life, and agency within the textual network of Mary Shelley. In the first chapter, I examine the publication history and textual production of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) as a materialized process and subsequently consider Shelley’s fictional depiction of decomposition in the novel as it circulated in 1818 to argue that *Frankenstein* destabilizes a definition of “life.” Chapter two, then, turns to Percy Shelley’s “On Life” (1819) in order to reflect and revises Mary Shelley’s theories of material decomposition. I assert that in “On Life” there is a system of repeated contradictions that suspends the need for a fixed definition of “life” and instead indicates that the concept is malleable. In chapter three, I build upon these theories of “life” to analyze the role of material objects in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826). I refer to Percy Shelley’s “Ozymandias” (1818) as a point of contrast and establish *The Last Man* and “Ozymandias” as warring theories of materiality: Where Percy Shelley indicates that all matter will decay, Mary Shelley offers a textual materiality that can seemingly outlive these material processes. Finally, in the fourth chapter, I trace the material network of Mary and Percy Shelley made visible on the Shelley-Godwin Archive. I consider the “matter” of text to reveal that *Frankenstein* has always been hypertext, a physical assemblage that already demonstrates the numerous, entangled factors impacting its composition. Moreover,
this thesis demonstrates Mary Shelley’s entanglement within a material, textual, and vital network that spans her writing and warring theories with Percy Shelley.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am humbled to realize the number of people I have to thank for their support while researching and writing this thesis. First and foremost, thank you to the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship, and, in particular, James Olsen and Maggie Debelius. I cannot express my appreciation enough for your guidance during my time at Georgetown. Thanks, too, to the professors in Georgetown’s English department, whose courses and conversation have greatly shaped this project, among them Samantha Pinto, Daniel Shore, Noel K. Sugimura, and Pamela Fox. Thanks as well to my friends who have tolerated me this year: Sam, for her unflagging encouragement; Jacob, for his willingness to be a sounding board; and Daniel, for his eagerness to celebrate even the smallest of accomplishments. And, above all, I am grateful for my mentors throughout this project. Thank you to Patrick O’Malley, who read and commented on numerous drafts and whose feedback has significantly improved my work. Your encouragement, thoughtful insights, and bowl of chocolates in your office have been invaluable to me this year. My deepest thanks to Nathan K. Hensley, my advisor throughout this thesis, whose attentive feedback has made me a better writer and thinker. I cannot express my appreciation enough for your enthusiasm and generosity. I am honored to have learned from you this year. Thank you.
CONTENTS

Introduction: Shelley’s Assemblages.................................................................1
Chapter 1: Disassembled Life: Material Agency in *Frankenstein*..................5
Chapter 3: Monuments for the Future: Matter in *The Last Man* and “Ozymandias” ...34
Chapter 4: TEI and the Digital *Frankenstein* ............................................43
Coda: Shelley, Networked .............................................................................60
Works Cited .................................................................................................62
Introduction

Shelley’s Assemblages

In the fictional Author’s Introduction that precedes *The Last Man* (1826), Mary Shelley concludes the process of collating manuscript fragments with the following statement: “I present the public with my latest discoveries in the slight Sibylline pages. Scattered and unconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consist form” (4). This thesis performs the work of the unnamed author’s textual collection and assemblage, a small moment in the narrative arc of *The Last Man*: It considers processes of textual production, both of the material book and represented in fictional form.

To interrogate Mary Shelley’s textual and material assemblages, this thesis examines *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Last Man* in contrast with two of Percy Shelley’s works, “On Life” (1819) and “Ozymandias” (1818), each of which grapples with questions of authorship and the concept of “life.” Yet—underpinning these intertwined theories of agency, text, and life—is a focus on “matter.” Recent movements to examine the mere stuff of the world have expanded our definition of matter. This critical turn, referred to as “new materialism,” endows nonhuman matter with agency ordinarily reserved for human subjects. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost describe the scope of this nonhuman matter when they write, “As human beings we inhabit an ineluctably material world. We live our everyday lives surrounded by, immersed in, matter. We are ourselves composed of matter” (1). For Coole and Frost, “matter” is pervasive, a substance that links the human and nonhuman alike. In *Vibrant Matter* (2010), which I discuss in chapter one, Jane Bennett references a similar, yet vague, conceptualization of “matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert” (vii). Particularly with references to “raw” and “brute” matter, Bennett
indicates that the material world consists of any physical substance, regardless of whether that material is animate or sentient. To define “matter” under this framework, then, means it is everything physical and palpable.

Various synonyms for “matter”—including “body,” “object,” and “text”—therefore can be categorized within this concept of “matter.” Yet, in the chapters that follow, I also demonstrate the nuances between these terms and reveal the ways in which they coalesce and collide with one another: “body,” the human frame that appears in chapter one; “object” the inanimate matter of chapters two and three; and “text,” the writing, both digital and print, addressed most directly in chapter four. In this sense, this thesis also assembles the various actors that contribute to authorship and textual production. Yet assembling and examining a multitude of actors requires, of course, a prioritization of focal points. Most frequently, this thesis attends to small-scale concepts, as with the grammatical implications of *Frankenstein* that I introduce in chapter one, and large-scale concepts, as with the larger philosophical underpinnings of Percy Shelley’s “On Life” that I explore in chapter two. It only considers “matter”—whether textual or fictional—of medium-scale when necessary to understand the intricacies of Mary Shelley’s network.

Chapter one investigates the brute matter of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. I begin by tracing the novel’s publication history with attention to the multiple editions that were published and circulated during the nineteenth-century. After considering how this publication history contributed to different trends in Shelleyan scholarship—ranging from historicist analysis of Shelley’s marriage to feminist analyses of *Frankenstein’s* composition history—I subsequently look to the text of the novel “itself,” by which I mean the fictional form of the 1818 edition. I examine Shelley’s depiction of decomposition and interrogate her treatment of the boundaries
between human and nonhuman. To explore why Shelley’s version of matter appears horror inducing for the titular Frankenstein, I offer Jane Bennett’s theory of assemblage from *Vibrant Matter* (2010) as a point of contrast. I ultimately conclude that *Frankenstein* disassembles “life” as a concept that has a fixed location or origin.

Chapter two follows this study of material decomposition by turning to definitions of life. Given Mary Shelley’s intentional ambiguity on the creation of life, I invoke Percy Shelley’s more explicit essay, “On Life” (1819). I emphasize Shelley’s reliance on a system of contrarieties, including polarized philosophies of materialism and idealism and the gendered associations of life as masculine and feminine. After outlining the philosophical underpinnings of Shelley’s essay, I demonstrate how they concurrently become more distinct and indistinguishable in the manuscript of “On Life.” Through this muddying of binary terms, I assert that Shelley’s process of textual composition and revision offers a theory of suspended existence, a “life” poised between alternative modes of being and nonbeing. If “On Life” is examined as text—rather than purely philosophy—Shelley’s proclivity to support both sides of philosophical and gendered binaries delays or defers the need for distinct meaning, which has the potential to reframe Shelley’s reputation as an “ineffectual angel” and fetish-status for deconstructionists (Arnold xxi).

Subsequently, chapter three builds on these definitions of life to consider the role of matter and material objects as they appear in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826). I pay particular attention to the way that narrator Lionel Verney crafts the legacy of seemingly immaterial, deceased plague victims as a material text. Given that *The Last Man* was Shelley’s first major publication following Percy Shelley’s unexpected death, I read the novel as a response to Percy’s theories of materiality, most significantly from his poem “Ozymandias”
(1818). I position *The Last Man* and “Ozymandias” as warring theories of materiality: While “Ozymandias” suggests that all matter is subject to decomposition over time, *The Last Man* proposes a textual futurity that can outlive processes of material decay.

In this thesis I have put Mary Shelley in dialogue with Percy in order to reflect or revise the intricacies of her theories of life and matter. Chapter four, then, looks at the material ecosystem of Mary and Percy Shelley that is made visible on the digital Shelley-Godwin Archive. I begin by illustrating the construction and interface of the archive overall, which in premise alone forces a consideration of the editorial hands at work within Mary and Percy Shelley’s work. Throughout this thesis, three different hands concretize the tension between author, editor, and reader. Chapter four examines these hands quite literally as it returns to the text of *Frankenstein*. I show the use of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) across the *Frankenstein* manuscripts to amplify the blurred roles of author, editor, and reader. Most significantly, in connection with digital theories of assemblage, I argue that *Frankenstein* has been a hypertext all along. The material text can be recognized as its own network or assemblage that captures the multitude of factors impacting its composition.

Ultimately, though, this thesis examines a broader network of Mary Shelley’s authorship that illustrates the entangled theories of agency, life, and matter. Although, as I discuss in chapter four, the digital archive implies that these issues are just beginning—a product of contemporary technological innovations—I demonstrate that these questions of materiality and textuality are inherent within Shelley’s work in manuscript form. This analysis ultimately offers new ways of understanding Shelley’s various assemblages that construct her authorial network.
Chapter 1

Disassembled Life: Material Agency in *Frankenstein*

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) is widely recognized as a novel about animation. It tracks the consequences of not only creating a new sentient being—which often implies the tandem creation of new matter—but imbuing already existing matter with life. The novel’s textual history is similarly familiar to audiences as a production of matter that has been revised and reanimated in the two centuries since its initial composition. In an author’s introduction appended to the revised 1831 edition, Mary Shelley explains that she wrote *Frankenstein* near Geneva in June 1816. During a famously rainy summer, she, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and John William Polidori, Byron’s doctor, read ghost stories aloud, before Byron suggested that each person write one of their own. Shelley recounts that she spent many days unsuccessfully trying to think of a story. Finally, after having listened to a conversation between Byron and Percy Shelley on “the principle of life,” she shut her eyes to see a “pale student of unhallowed arts” bent over his creation, “this thing, which had received such imperfect animation would subside into dead matter” (“Author’s Introduction” 195, 196). Famously, this sketch of the “imperfect animation” began as a short story of few pages, yet remains at the core of *Frankenstein*’s narrative.

Over the following year, Shelley completed the narrative with the “collaborative help” of Percy (St. Clair 357).¹ This initial composition phase is perhaps one of the most debated in

---

¹ Critics, such as William St. Clair, often refer to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley using only her first name, whereas Percy Bysshe Shelley is generally discussed using his last or full name, as in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*. For clarity, an alternative naming method might use MWS and PBS to describe Mary and Percy respectively. This thesis will use “Shelley” to refer to
*Frankenstein* criticism as scholars have argued that Mary and Percy Shelley collaborated to varying degrees. While marginalia—and Mary Shelley’s statement that the preface was “entirely written by” Percy—supports the hypothesis that both writers did contribute to the manuscripts, many critics have used the textual evidence to contest the novel’s authorship (“Author’s Introduction” 197). An example can be found in John Lauritsen’s *The Man Who Wrote Frankenstein* (2007), which claims that Percy Shelley is the legitimate author of the novel ostensibly because Mary Shelley was “a weak and sentimental writer, incapable of writing *Frankenstein*” (Cover copy). More recently, critics have acknowledged the novel is a product of both writers without attempting to argue for a single author, such as where Charles E. Robinson writes that his edited version of the novel, *The Original Frankenstein* (2008), is by “Mary Shelley (with Percy Shelley)” 2 (Robinson). Yet *Frankenstein*’s earliest textual history, including Shelley and her collaborator’s revision of the short story into a completed novel, remains problematic. The original drafts no longer exist, as they were recast into the version published in 1818 (Fraistat et al., “Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus”).

The oldest extant *Frankenstein* manuscripts therefore constitute drafts of the completed novel closer to its first publication. After initial revisions in 1816 and 1817, Percy Shelley attempted to negotiate with leading publishers for *Frankenstein* to no avail. Following multiple rejections, in 1818 Percy contracted the publication of 500 copies of the first edition with Lackington (St. Clair 359). In accordance with contemporary modes of publication and dissemination, the novel was “anonymous, in three volumes, and expensive, a book intended to

---

2 The Shelley-Godwin Archive uses Robinson’s research to attribute authorial hands through the `<handShift>` tag. As I will discuss in chapter four, digital visualizations of the collaboration between Mary and Percy Shelley on the *Frankenstein* manuscripts allow for alternative, nonlinear readings of the novel.
be sold primarily to commercial circulating libraries” (St. Clair 359). Once the first edition sold out, the publisher did not renew a second edition. It was only after Shelley’s father, William Godwin, heard of an upcoming stage production almost five years later that the novel was printed again. Godwin negotiated a second edition in 1823 with a new publisher, which was condensed into two volumes and attributed to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (St. Clair 360). This version continued to sell through the 1830s.

However, due to the continued popularity of various *Frankenstein* stage productions, Shelley negotiated a third and final publication deal that saw the last of her major revisions to the text. In 1831, she sold the copyright for her novel to Richard Bentley, who circulated works from popular authors in *Bentley’s Standard Novels*. Following Bentley’s standard requirement that “the author should correct errors and supply new material either in the text or as a paratextual preface or notes,” she made several changes to the text itself. Additionally, Shelley added an author’s introduction that reveals her inspiration for the novel, now infamously described as “my hideous progeny” (“Author’s Introduction” 197). This third edition was circulated for nearly two decades; however, after copyright laws changed under the Copyright Act of 1842 “publishers were no longer willing to let [Bentley] have the copyrights cheap” (St. Clair 363). *Frankenstein* eventually went out of print and remained inaccessible for nearly thirty years. It was only after these copyright restrictions ended around 1880 that reprinting began, allowing *Frankenstein* to be widely read and seen as material for literary criticism (St. Clair 365).

*Frankenstein* scholarship has varied widely in argument and methodology about Shelley’s treatment of radical science and the creation of life since the novel was re-popularized near the turn of the twentieth century. One popular argument builds on Mary Shelley’s description of *Frankenstein* as “my hideous progeny” to suggest that the novel depicts a birth
narrative (“Author’s Introduction” 197). Ellen Moers asserts that the bulk of the narrative does not emphasize conception or the birth itself, but rather works through “the trauma of the afterbirth” (93). Anne K. Mellor further observes that the timeline of Walton’s letters that narrate Frankenstein’s story takes place over the course of a tidy nine months. Works like Mellor’s have also yielded a tradition of psychological and biographical readings that claim the novel is symbolic of Shelley’s own birth and that of her children. Other Shelleyan critics have read Frankenstein as commentary on the development of early nineteenth-century science, such as Marilyn Butler’s suggestion that the novel reenacts the notable dispute between John Abernethy, President of London’s Royal College of Surgeons, and his former student, William Lawrence. Alternatively, a biographical-historicist trend has presented extended analysis on Shelley’s marriage and familial history rather than the content of her writing.

More recently, speculative investigations of Shelley’s personal history have shifted toward studies that use her biography to encourage new readings of issues attached to the text, like its composition history. One notable example, Julie A. Carlson, asserts, “Reading [Shelley and her parents] as a family shifts the valence of the authority, autonomy, and authenticity often ascribed to authorship” (3). Carlson implies that if readers account for Mary Shelley’s literary network—her husband, parents, and multiple publishers that shaped Frankenstein throughout the composition and revision process—we can complicate binaries of “person and text, private and public, living and writing” (3). Regardless of methodology, most of these approaches circle around Shelley’s depiction of “life” through Frankenstein’s creature and examine the consequences of generating new life through non-biological processes. Yet Shelleyan scholars are just starting to examine how the novel represents the brute matter that Frankenstein collects to build his creature. These pieces of matter offer a material site—albeit a fictional one—for the
exploration of vitalism in *Frankenstein* and suggest how “life” can emerge from a collection of disjointed, dissimilar tissues.

This chapter investigates Shelley’s fictional treatment of matter, how this raises tensions between human and nonhuman actors, and the strange absence of discussion about the human body, despite this being the ostensible focus of the novel overall. As I will examine shortly, one of the most striking scenes for this analysis is Frankenstein’s attempt to understand how human bodies decompose. He proposes that an understanding of decay is a prerequisite to any experiment of animation when he declares, “To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 33). In having “recourse to death,” the end of life—and the decay that follows—paradoxically becomes a source to generate new life. By interrogating this process as a revelatory moment for Frankenstein, Shelley theorizes the degree to which matter can be assembled, interacted with, and ultimately distorted. Why does tissue become horror-inducing when viewed for an extended window of time at such close proximity, when moments before it represented the possibility of new life and futurity?

To consider what makes Shelley’s depiction of matter grotesque, if not monstrous, to the onlooker, I put *Frankenstein* in conversation with a contemporary theory of assemblage from Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* (2010). Although separated from Shelley by nearly two centuries, Bennett’s strikingly optimistic interest in considering human and nonhuman matter’s equal potential for power provides a way to reread and refine Shelley’s understanding of materiality. I argue that the difference between these two theories—and the reason that *Frankenstein* elicits Frankenstein’s revulsion to the materials in the charnel house—is an issue of scale. From the position of a human observer gazing onto the collections of materials, both theories present matter of relatively similar sizes, such as the rat and the worm. Yet where Bennett breaks up the
pile of matter that she finds into separate materials, we can probe this matter even further to consider that these seemingly isolated objects are themselves micro-assemblages, small entanglements of different substances that are permeated by their surroundings. In contrast, Shelley’s text troubles the materiality of the seemingly isolated objects, only to reveal an increasingly complicated network of relationships. It is this magnified scale that seems to prompt Frankenstein’s affective response; the horror of *Frankenstein*’s aggregation and assemblage emerges from considering the granular details of the material at hand. By focusing on matter at the micro level, Shelley disassembles and distributes where life is located within the body as Frankenstein’s observations suggest that life exists between components of a material network, without a fixed location or origin. Through this distribution, *Frankenstein* broadens the definition of “life” and troubles what materials can be considered animate.

Although the aim of Victor Frankenstein’s project is scientifically to generate human life, the text depicts this process through his observation of death. Upon removing himself to “vaults and charnel houses” for several days, Frankenstein states:

> My attention was fixed upon every object the most insupportable to the delicacy of the human feelings. I saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted; I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life; I saw how the worm inherited the wonders of the eye and brain. I paused, examining and analyzing all the minutiae of causation, as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life, until from the midst of this darkness a sudden light broke in upon me… (34)

After recounting his aim to study human decomposition, Frankenstein describes “every object the most insupportable to the delicacy of the human feelings” and thereby minimizes a focus on the corpses. The phrase is devoid of language related to the body—where he might have named
specific body parts like arms or legs—and instead characterizes the corpses as “object[s],”
distancing the residual dead matter from its previous humanness. Yet in contrast with the label of
“object,” the material in the charnel houses ostensibly still maintains the appearance and shape of
the human, as Frankenstein avoids overly decayed bodies such as “food for the worm” in
churchyards (34). In fact, he evades discussing the material of the bodies entirely. Frankenstein
instead focuses on “all the minutiæ of causation” and the scale at which these pieces of matter—
human or nonhuman—are interconnected. Although the word “minutiæ” tends to signal aspects
that are trivial, in the context of this scene it indicates a focus on a granular level as Frankenstein
looks to the smallest possible visual cues. Thus, as Frankenstein considers matter on an
increasingly detailed scale, the human remnants and objects are made indistinguishable.

This conflation of corporeal remnants and objects blurs the ontological boundaries of the
human, particularly as the body becomes a participant in the seemingly cyclical nature of “the
change from life to death, and death to life.” Rather than describing the restoration of life with a
word like reanimate, the phrase “from life to death, and death to life” implies that life to death
and death to life are inverse processes with identical inputs and outputs, only separated by the
pause of a comma. As Frankenstein continues on to emphasize the “degraded and wasted” body,
tainted with the “corruption of death,” he focuses on physical and irreversible damages that—
unlike the cyclical return to death after life—suggest a permanency at odds with any attempt to
return life to “lifeless matter” (34). As a result, the pieces of human tissue are paradoxically
damaged beyond repair and expected to become material for a body that will be injected with
life.

Movement between life and death is further complicated by the detail that “the worm
inherited the wonders of the eye and brain.” While a nineteenth-century definition of “inherit”
includes, “To take possession, take up an abode, dwell,” it also is defined as, “To take or receive … as the heir of the former possessor (usually an ancestor), at his decease” (“inherit, v.”). Thus, although “inherit” might reference the worm’s literal and physical movement into the human organs—making this dead body its new home—it simultaneously invokes a kind of economic exchange between the human body and the nonhuman. The worm comes to possess—or, at minimum, experience a closer contact with—some “wonder” or extraordinary attribute of the formerly human body only once it is dead matter, the residual “eye” and “brain” at the end of the sentence. The worm thereby derives power from or “ownership” over these dead pieces of tissue and creates a distorted version of the distributive horizontalization of agency that Jane Bennett locates within human-nonhuman assemblages.

Bennett’s philosophy of assemblage, which she describes in her book Vibrant Matter, emerges as a part of the recent critical turn to new materialism. As I note in the introduction, scholars across disciplines have begun to examine the material world and objects often deemed mere stuff as a way to realize nonhuman participation in ordinary events. Although a new means of ascribing power to material things, new materialism reanimates and entangles historical theories of ontology and epistemology that were separated in the Enlightenment to suggest a continuous interplay between matter and our knowledge about it. A political theorist by trade, Bennett notably politicizes this ongoing conversation as her theory exposes an interpenetration of human and nonhuman materials. Rather than being a primarily anthropocentric power, arrogated only to human actors, agency is diffused among a “federation of actants”: This distributed power is strongest in the connections between actants in the federation rather than any one actant alone (28). Although she notes that agency, or “thing-power,” is distributed unevenly among different materials, Bennett writes, “Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to
function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23-4). Only a paragraph later, she states that an electrical power grid exemplifies these “living, throbbing confederations.” Bennett thus describes a metallic, systematic network of high-voltage transmission lines, transformers, and power plants and substations that transfers electricity between producers and consumers as “living.” Her theory not only affords a collection of matter with agency, but actually endows the system with life, once a condition reserved solely for organic bodies.

In this sentence alone, Bennett’s language works to conceal the strangeness of her vitalism. The paired “living” and “throbbing” are tucked into the front of the sentence and nearly masked by conflicting “energies that confound from within.” Instead of illuminating a fundamental aspect of life that exists throughout the assemblage, the concluding “within” alludes to an ostensible barrier or outside that fixes the confederation’s parameters and thereby turns the assemblage into a closed system. Yet the phrase “living, throbbing” seems to reveal how the tensions within the assemblage manifest. While “living” seemingly declares that the assemblages are alive, “throbbing” connotes a steady albeit perverse and genital-like pulsation. In addition to a sense of rhythmicity, “throbbing” suggests that the assemblage exhibits some physical change—like an organic pulse—while it is alive. Thus, as the phrase “living, throbbing” splices the two adjectives side by side, it is this seemingly physical condition that reframes life within

---

3 It is worth noting the difference between “living” and “alive.” These two words seem to carry different connotations of life, particularly in a consideration of vital and vibrant matter; however, entries in the OED essentially point back to one another. Where alive is defined as, “Of a person, animal, or plant: living, not dead,” living appears as, “Alive, not dead” (“alive”; “living”). In relation to Frankenstein’s phrase “from life to death, and death to life,” these definitions reflect the ability to define life only in relationship to a seemingly inverse process, where the material is “not dead” (34).
Bennett’s description. The vitalism is defined by a palpable symptom that can be experienced from outside of the assemblage as well as “within” it.

To describe the living, throbbing assemblages as “confederations” and, shortly thereafter as federations, explicitly politicizes Bennett’s vitalism. Where one might expect these systems to be referred to as a more neutral collection, aggregation, or cluster, “confederations” and “federation[s]” are words that indicate a league or alliance between materials within the assemblage: Federation is explicitly defined as “the formation of a political unit from a number of separate states, provinces, or colonies, each of which remains more or less independent with regard to its internal affairs” (“federation”). The cohesion of these confederations therefore becomes an issue of sovereignty as individual states or seemingly unified entities that compose an assemblage compete for power independent of the system as a whole. When read as an isolated, politicized statement, Bennett’s phrasing indicates that an assemblage is continuously in conflict with itself, and exhibits a tension that ostensibly should prevent the assemblage from living or functioning.

While the assemblage’s internal struggle has the potential to be unsettling, it is presented as markedly positive: Bennett romanticizes the agency of the nonhuman material world and champions a worldview that displaces humans as the dominant and most valuable form of life. Her favorable perception of nonhuman matter might be best exemplified by the anecdote she uses to begin Vibrant Matter, where she provides a list of material objects, including an “unblemished dead rat,” that attract her attention as having a “thing-power” (4). Although she describes initially being “repelled,” Bennett never reaches the extreme of being revolted or even sickened. To the contrary, she never treats the rat as a deteriorating body, slowly festering and putrefying in the summer heat. She only considers the carcass from a distance and its ability to
yield an emotional reaction is reduced, as the rat is only one piece of matter among a small
collection of things. Bennett’s philosophy of aggregation thus idealizes matter in its willingness
only to examine actants on the surface without looking to their internal, perhaps more repulsive
processes.

In contrast, Shelley’s portrait of the worm crawling among dead human matter is
horrifying to Frankenstein, implying an opposition to the power of nonhumans when it comes at
the expense of the human body. The moment preceding Frankenstein’s pivotal discovery of the
key to animating matter is represented as being grotesque and unsettling to readers, particularly
when juxtaposed with Shelley’s generally antiseptic language. This disgust does not stem from
the human body’s inability to function. Rather, disgust is the viewing subject’s response upon
seeing the body, visibly deteriorating and decaying. Frankenstein exalts the “fine form of
man”—even referring to the body as “the seat of beauty and strength”—while watching human
tissue break down and peel away to leave fragments of a formerly cohesive whole (34). The
body can no longer be romanticized as a site of beauty because it has exposed itself as raw pieces
of disjointed matter, a sight horrifying to Frankenstein. His revulsion within the charnel houses
becomes a stand in for the reader’s: the human body parts appear as objects unendurable to the
“delicacy of human feelings,” suggesting the fragility of humans’ emotional range while also
detaching “object” from what is marked as “human.” Yet matter in the scene has “degraded,”
“wasted,” and decayed—rather than being inert or cast aside—as worms begin to burrow within
and around a presumably septic body. The exchange between the worm and human organs
therefore depicts a disruption in the distribution of agency between human and nonhuman; power
seems to be stripped from the human almost entirely. This scene troubles not only the concept of
“life,” but also seems to alter the category of “death” as it suggests that the decayed matter can never fully be restored.

But Frankenstein’s disgust at this nonhuman dominance is momentary. Almost immediately after noticing the worm, Frankenstein disregards it to consider what permits the animation of matter. He ignores the object as a point of disgust instead of confronting its material, derailing his own description when he explains, “I paused, examining and analyzing all the minutiae of causation” (34). Frankenstein’s recovery from his recoil is therefore a brief, self-imposed pause, rather than a jolt or startling image that breaks his fixation on the grotesque. “I paused,” narrated in the simple past tense, marks the specific moment of this recovery. Prior to this sentence, Frankenstein recounts his experience of the charnel house in retrospect, where his verbs are either in the simple past tense or a passive form of the past tense: “was fixed,” “I saw,” “I beheld,” “I saw” (34). It is only after his pause that Frankenstein shifts to “examining and analyzing” using the present participle. This minor grammatical change reveals a redistribution of agency in Frankenstein’s pivot from the observation of pure matter to an epistemological consideration of life: He no longer watches the exchange between worm and corpse as an onlooker, but becomes a source of power that actively inspects all “the minutiae of causation,” and thereby all the microscopic details of the assemblage at hand.

Although the passage seemingly indicates that these “minutiae of causation” will reveal the process of animation, Frankenstein does not expound on the causality of human decay. In fact, the human matter all but disappears from the scene as Frankenstein becomes absorbed with communicating the force of “a sudden light” that emerges in his moment of reflection. The light replaces issues of ontology with affect as Frankenstein describes it to be “so brilliant and wondrous, yet so simple, that while I became dizzy with the immensity of the prospect which it
illustrated, I was surprised that among so many men of genius, who had directed their inquiries
towards the same science, that I alone should be reserved to discover so astonishing a secret”
(34). Where the light is presumably a thought, it is never connected with any form of cognition—
the thought is a dizzying “secret” that is to be discovered, as if separate from the mind entirely.
Moreover, it is presented as “brilliant,” “wondrous,” and something that not even “so many men
of genius” have been able to figure out. As Frankenstein emphasizes the singularity of his
revelation, belaboring that “I alone should be reserved” for its discovery, he promotes not only
human exceptionalism but also his own superior position within this hierarchy. In light of the
creature’s animation later in the novel, Frankenstein’s attempt to raise himself above other life
forms fails to reassert human power and thereby enables the possibility of nonhuman dominance.

Jane Bennett offers a variation of this distribution of agency when she reflects back on
the communicative capacity of the electrical grid. She compares the grid’s ability to
communicate with humans to her own process of composition, writing, “My speech, for
example, depends on the graphite in my pencil, millions of persons, dead and alive, in my Indo-
European language group, not to mention the electricity in my brain and my laptop. (The human
brain, properly wired, can light up a fifteen-watt bulb.)” (36). Bennett’s progression of logic in
her first sentence nearly erodes the barriers of the presumably isolated, “living, throbbing”
assemblages (23). She begins by linking her speech to the “graphite in [her] pencil,” where we
are to assume that Bennett uses this graphite to write down her thoughts before delivering them
orally. She continues on to declare that her speech equally depends on “millions of persons, dead
and alive, in my Indo-European language group.” Bennett does not invoke her “Indo-European
language group” to create a genealogy for her own work, but claims that her present speech is
reliant on the lives of millions of people. Under this line of thought, there are no limits of what
can contribute to Bennett’s speech. Accordingly, her concept of an assemblage is boundless, where agency is distributed across an infinitesimal number of actors.

Yet Bennett’s philosophy of assemblage is unable to abandon the human entirely as the center of this distribution of agency. The parenthetical reference to her description of composing speech is most revealing: “(The human brain, properly wired, can light up a fifteen-watt bulb.)” This brief aside appears as an innocuous and even interesting tidbit about electrical activity in the brain, but does not further the Bennett’s interpenetration of nonhuman and human matter. Here the fifteen-watt bulb has no vibrancy like the transmission lines of the electrical grid and merely lights up to signal of human activity: It is a way of reinforcing the magnitude of human power. But the emphasis on “properly wired,” sectioned off within its own set of commas, reveals the limitations of this magnitude as it implies that there are human brains that are not properly wired. Bennett’s aside more broadly raises the possibility that human power might fail or malfunction without probing potentially awful, unforeseen consequences of this human exceptionalism, such as those that result from Frankenstein’s project to generate new human life.

To consider Bennett’s distributive horizontalization of agency as a positive opposite of Frankenstein’s grotesque ontology illuminates a tension between brute matter and human exceptionalism that exists in both attempts to imbue the nonhuman with agency. Bennett and Shelley’s treatments of matter suggest alternatives to purely anthropocentric forms of power, but are insistent on maintaining human superiority. Like with Frankenstein’s revelation beyond “so many men of genius” after he watches the worm crawl among human tissue, human exceptionalism succeeds instances when nonhuman agency appears at odds with the human body (34). However, the attempt to conceal the strange vitality of pure matter falls flat. The peculiarity of the nonhuman—the worm, dead bones from the charnel houses, Bennett’s graphite—always
seeps back into the scene, resulting in a repeated cyclical redistribution of agency. The oscillation between the nonhuman and human further suggests Frankenstein’s anxiety that the human is nothing but pieces of brute matter—disjointed tissue—stitched together into a cohesive, aesthetically pleasing body. Issues of agency not only between different types of matter but within isolated pieces of matter therefore complicate a singular definition of life. If synthetic materials like those of Jane Bennett’s electrical grid are endowed with agency, how far can we extend the limits of “life”? How much matter must be aggregated before something can be considered alive?

Though *Frankenstein* omits a description of the creature’s animation, the scene in the charnel house reveals that “life,” for Shelley, remains a concept that can only exist within seemingly cohesive bodies. As revealed by Frankenstein’s revulsion at the disintegrating “fine form of man,” “life” is unfathomable and grotesque among fragmentary body parts strewn about the charnel houses (34). In *Frankenstein* “life,” then, is determined by a body’s appearance as a unified assemblage, rather than the amount or type of matter that exhibits this “life.” Yet, as I will explore in the next chapter with Percy Shelley’s “On Life,” “life” for Mary and Percy Shelley alike still remains an indefinable, “astonishing thing” (Shelley, “On Life” 633).
“Life, and the world, or whatever we call that which we are and feel, is an astonishing thing,” begins Percy Shelley’s “On Life” (1819).\(^4\) “The mist of familiarity obscures from us the wonder of our being” (633). For Shelley, the removal of this “mist of familiarity” or, subsequently, what he calls the “painted curtain,” is a necessary precursor to understanding the concept of “life” (634). While these images imply that “life” is merely a monolith waiting to be exposed upon dissolving the mist or scraping off the painted curtain, Shelley’s version of “life” is more fractured and fragmented in form. Shelley’s opening passage separates ontology from phenomenology—what we “are” and “feel,” respectively—to introduce the concept of “life” as dependent both on philosophical materialism, here the material “world,” and idealism, how this material is perceived (633). Syntax is key to Shelley’s claim. The words “are” and “feel” are divided, but remain connected with the conjunction “and.” In Shelley’s essay, “life,” then, is simultaneously both what we “are” and “feel,” yet neither of these categories exclusively. It is suspended between them, made permanently indefinable through the attempt to pinpoint “What is life?” (633).

The concurrent categorization of “life” as polarized concepts is common through “On Life.” Shelley, for example, creates two definitions of “life” that differ greatly in scale, such as the opening use of the word “life” that only refers to “that which we are and feel” (633, emphasis mine). “We,” in this instance, are presumably his contemporaries, or, more broadly, the human species. This definition of life that privileges the human “we” is narrower and more

---

\(^4\) As I address later in this chapter, although Shelley drafted “On Life” in 1819, the essay was only published in 1832, nearly a decade after his death (Leader and O’Neill 821).
anthropocentric than the “Life—that which includes all,” which emerges two paragraphs later (633). Shelley’s second use of the word “life” is capitalized in the middle of a sentence to make it a proper noun, but signals a specific, identifiable entity rather than a quality that permeates all, a seemingly infinite quantity. Similarly, Shelley’s diction refuses the possibility that “life” is an inherently gendered concept when he oscillates between stereotypically feminine language—life sometimes as an act of “birth” that is associated with the artist’s rich images of “the grass and the flowers”—and masculine language—the inability of language to “penetrate” mysteries of existence (633).

This chapter examines Shelley’s use of the philosophical, material, and gendered binaries as a way of understanding his otherwise illegible definition of “life.” “On Life” initially appears to muddy these philosophical, material, and gendered binaries. For example, Shelley’s shift from a materialist to an idealist philosophy mid-essay, which bifurcates “On Life” into two distinct sections, could be thought to reveal his ideological uncertainties. Yet, if this binary is subjected to closer scrutiny, the inclusion of these two competing perspectives on “life” creates a system of contrariety: the repeated contradictions in “On Life” permanently suspend the need for a fixed definition of “life” and instead indicates that the concept is malleable and mobile.

Shelley’s attempt to define “life” is characteristic of the exploration of life and animation in Romantic literature. Ross Wilson describes the frequency of questions asking, “What is life?,” before stressing that authors rarely offered conclusive answers (1). Rather, Romantic writers’ poems and prose nearly always appeared as “testimonies to the difficulty of responding to [the question of what defines life]” (Wilson 1). As Wilson demonstrates with Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s final lines in a letter to William Worship, “Is very life by consciousness unbounded? / And all the thoughts, pains, joys of mortal breath / A war-embrace of wrestling life and death?”
these testimonies often put “life” in comparison with images like “a war-embrace” that describe the presence of life without defining it (qtd. in Wilson 1). Likewise explaining the Romantics’ “preoccupation with defining life,” Sharon Ruston attributes this “preoccupation” to an increasing number of scientific experiments during the period (116). By the time that Percy Shelley was actively writing and publishing, there were developments in comparative anatomy that suggested humans shared more with other species, explains Ruston, in addition to assertions that the “universe was far bigger than had been thought” (117, 116). These discoveries muddied the distinction between humans and their environment, and, as a result, broadened the concept of life (116). Human life became a small piece of an “all-encompassing” conceptualization of “life” that ranged from microbes to potential organisms on other planets (Ruston 116).

In addition to existing as a scientific, biological attribute, “life” was also a site of conceptual exploration for the Romantics, described by Robert Mitchell as a dual “scientific and literary experimentalism” (Mitchell 4). When Mitchell narrates a genealogy for this experimentalism, he links the concepts of “life” and “vitalism” when he writes that during the Romantic period these terms “referred both to the biology of living beings as well as to those social and political forms of life by means of which groups of people were bound to one another” (5). As Mitchell indicates, “life,” then, is not strictly a condition that distinguishes organic from inorganic matter; it also can describe the interactions between bodies of organic matter—groups of people, in this example—in society. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill assert that Shelley frequently employs these flexible binaries with their comment that “the self and the world, or the private and the public, are fluid in Shelley’s work” (xxii). If we account for “On Life,” we can also add biological and social-political life to Leader and O’Neill’s list. Shelley’s “On Life” refers to both “biology” and “social and political forms,” but makes no attempt to privilege one
as a definitive answer to the exploration of life (Mitchell 5). Instead, “On Life” indicates that for Percy Shelley the concept of “life” is defined and enhanced by its contradictions, permanently at odds with attempts to identify its cause or origin.

Although Shelley articulates the differences between materialism and idealism through poetry, these schools of thought can be historicized as philosophy. Materialism, associated with philosophers such as Lucretius and Holbach, is the concept that “the universe is a material entity” and brute matter is understood as having “qualities such as motion and energy within it” (Cameron, “Philosophy” 580). Additionally, for materialists, the mind is “only another manifestation of matter,” and there is consequently no distinction between human and nonhuman matter (Cameron, “Philosophy” 580). All aspects of existence—including physical laws of the universe and sentience—begin with matter as the foundational substance, where this matter has always existed without the presence of God as a “creator” or “acting force” (Cameron, “Philosophy” 580). While some critics like Amanda Jo Goldstein have contended that Shelley maintains his interest in materialism through The Triumph of Life (1822), Shelley’s engagement with materialist philosophy is most apparent in The Necessity of Atheism (1811), among his earlier writings (Goldstein 60). As the title of the essay suggests, Shelley rejects the existence of a creator in The Necessity of Atheism on the grounds that something would have had to create this god. Where he argues that God cannot exist as a “divine implantation,” Shelley begins to hint at what he refers to as the “seducing system” of materialism in “On Life” (Cameron, “Philosophy” 580; Shelley 634).

But the material system in “On Life” remains a hypothetical one. Shelley only speculates about materialism in his essay without fully committing to a definition of “life” that is wholly dependent on matter. After he introduces the concept of “life,” Shelley embeds his descriptions
of the matter that makes up “this earth, the mountains, the seas and the rivers” in a conditional clause that begins, “If any artist…” (“On Life” 633, emphasis mine). The formation of this system is merely offered as a thought experiment for an “artist” to tackle the impossible task of painting scenes that do not already exist in the material world. Instead, Shelley continues on to declare that he is “discontented” with materialism and associates it with “young and superficial minds” (634). This moment of discontent marks Shelley’s shift to an idealist philosophy, where material “objects have no privileged status” and his interests are shaped by “the relation of things to the spaces they occupy” (Howe 109).

In contrast with materialism, idealism argues that the universe is immaterial, where matter is only created after the development of consciousness and the mind. Idealist philosophy is further divided between two competing theories: Platonic idealists understand the material world as “an imperfect shadow of the mind of God” and Berkeleian idealists consider that “the world is the mind of God” and that “what looks like matter is, in fact, a spiritual substance” (Cameron, “Philosophy” 580). For idealists, the creation of matter is always subsidiary to a larger governing force or figure that determines the interactions of matter. Critics have debated the extent of Percy Shelley’s idealism following Mary Shelley’s assertion that “[Percy] Shelley was a disciple of the Immaterial Philosophy of Berkeley” in her introduction to Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations, and Fragments (xii). As Cameron explains, few critics “have gone so far as to consider Shelley a Berkeleian,” who considers the material world to be “a spiritual substance” (“Philosophy” 581, 580).

A definition of “life” that is irreconcilable with itself is only fitting when we consider Shelley’s fragmented composition of his essay. It is estimated that Shelley’s “On Life” was written in late 1819, given that the earliest known manuscript draft comes from a notebook that
also contains another essay, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, written during the same period (Leader and O’Neill 821). While “On Life” underwent revisions, the manuscript remained unfinished during Shelley’s lifetime. “On Life” was published posthumously by Thomas Medwin, Shelley’s cousin, in 1832 and 1833 in *The Athanaeum* and, later, revised and re-published “in a more accurate form” by Mary Shelley in an 1840 collection of Percy Shelley’s essays, letters, and fragments (Leader and O’Neill 821). In manuscript form, Shelley’s essay remains untitled and the header instead contains a “small sketch of a tree” and images of two shields (“On life: autograph manuscript”).

---

5 Percy Shelley began *A Philosophical View of Reform* in the fall of 1819, but his “failure to get a publisher discouraged” him from writing beyond the third chapter (Cameron, *Shelley* 128). Following his death, Mary Shelley never attempted to publish the unfinished manuscript, although it remained with the collection of papers that were willed to her daughter-in-law, Lady Jane Shelley. The essay was finally published “in the condition of the first draft” in 1920 (Rolleston).
The addition of the title, “On Life,” occurred after the essay’s original composition and conflicts with Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill’s statement that Mary Shelley published the essay in “a more accurate form” (821). Although the 1832 and 1833 publications of the essay are no longer extant, the title “On Life” was added by 1840, when Mary Shelley published *Letters from Abroad, Translations, and Fragments*, a collection of Percy Shelley’s essays, *Essays*. Likely added when “On Life” was integrated into the essay collection, the title becomes the
substitute for the drawing of a tree. The tree—evoking the archetypal “tree of life” that dates back to the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*—visually associates the concept of “life” with a perennial plant that is always actively growing and changing, an image that he returns to in “The Sensitive Plant” (1820). As shown above in Shelley’s sketch, this particular tree appears full of foliage, yet without discernable leaves or branches. If we understand Shelley’s tree as a gesture toward the definition of “life” that he develops throughout “On Life,” then Shelley’s “life” can be encapsulated by the nature of a sketch: rough, unfinished, with clear outlines but obscured detail.

This obscured detail comes in part from the unfinished state of the essay. Shelley’s manuscript contains numerous cancellations and insertions that he made while drafting, many of which remain unresolved in “On Life” as it is published today; the revisions make Shelley’s conflicting conceptual frameworks visible. After initially aligning himself with the “seducing system” of materialism in the first several paragraphs, Shelley refers to a nonphysical characteristic of life: a spirit (634). He describes that the spirit resides within man and is always “at enmity with nothingness and dissolution, change and extinction” (634). “This [spirit] is the character of all life and being,” Shelley continues on to explain, “Each is at once the centre and the circumference; the point to which all things are referred, and the line within which all things are contained” (634). While the spirit in this passage does not reference a particular god or deity, it is associated with a belief or sensation entirely removed from the material world. Shelley’s description of the spirit as both “centre” and “circumference”— “point” and “line”—conveys that this spirit is simultaneously the defining aspect of “life” and the limits of it. Most significantly, the emphasis on spirit aligns with an idealist philosophy.
Yet Shelley’s philosophy in “On Life” does not appear to clearly fit within either version of idealism where matter is an “imperfect shadow” or “a spiritual substance” (Cameron, “Philosophy” 580). Instead, Shelley proposes that “there is a spirit within” man that characterizes all “life and being” (634). The material itself—in this instance, the human body—is not spiritual. The spirit resides “within” man. The word “within” suggests that Shelley’s “spirit” is housed or encased in the human body, but is still separate from the matter. If Shelley’s essay is read strictly as a philosophical text, this interplay between spirit and matter remains incoherent. But if we consider “On Life” as a poetic philosophical performance—in line with Cameron’s identification of Shelley as “a poet of ideas”—the textual inconsistencies reveal deeper conceptual tensions (“Philosophy” 580).

As Leader and O’Neill elaborate in their editorial notes on “On Life,” the phrase of “change and extinction” is “written above ‘nothingness and dissolution’ in the manuscript; neither pair of nouns is cancelled” (Leader and O’Neill 822). The word spirit, seemingly central to Shelley’s understanding of what defines “life,” is then always in opposition to both pairs: “change and extinction” and “nothingness and dissolution.” These pairs are further coupled when they appear in published, edited versions of “On Life.” They do not appear above one another as in Shelley’s manuscript, but instead are printed linearly where “change and extinction,” following a comma, seems to redefine “nothingness and dissolution.” Through this arrangement, the word “change” becomes the counterpart of “nothingness” and “extinction” is similarly associated with “dissolution.” But “change and extinction” and “nothingness and dissolution” do not appear as equal substitutions or replacements for the same concept. The definitions of “change” and “nothingness” conflict, given that “change” suggests a process of transformation or growth into something different while “nothingness” implies total absence of anything to change.
The association between “extinction” and “dissolution” is similarly incongruous, as the words respectively indicate total eradication and a more gradual, incomplete process of dissipation. Under this framework, then, the “spirit” which Shelley claims is the “character of all life and being” is simultaneously at odds with difference and nonexistence: it is a force that influences all things, but is static and unchanging as it permeates every part of the material world.

Shelley’s conclusion deepens the dissonance between definitions of “life” by troubling what can be considered a part of the material world. Here, Shelley enmeshes the concepts of the “mind” and “material.” “Mind,” Shelley writes in the final paragraph, “can only perceive. It is also said to be the Cause. But cause is only a word expressing a certain state of the human mind with regard to the manner in which two thoughts are apprehended to be related to each other” (636). Leader and O’Neill note that the phrase “the manner in which two thoughts are apprehended” was revised in Shelley’s initial manuscript. Although the copy-text only mentions “two thoughts,” Shelley “seems to have written ‘things’ first, then to have written ‘thoughts’ above it” (Leader and O’Neill 823). Leader and O’Neill continue on to emphasize, “Neither word is cancelled; we have chosen what appears to have been [Shelley’s] latest choice” (823). Unlike “nothingness and dissolution, change and extinction”—both the initial and revised phrases are included in copy-text—this example marks an editorial emendation of Shelley’s philosophy (634).

The replacement of “things” with “thoughts” collapses the distinction between materialism and idealism. If we begin by examining Shelley’s initial phrasing that “things are

---

6 This collapse of materialism and idealism in “On Life” resonates with Shelley’s “A Defence of Poetry,” composed two years later in 1821. In “A Defence of Poetry,” the speaker posits, “All things exist as they are perceived,” before noting: “The mind is its own place, and of itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven” (698). This description of the mind as “its own place”
apprehended,” the passage reinforces a materialist philosophy. The mind—the “cause” of life, in this passage—can understand the relationship between “things,” pure pieces of matter (636, emphasis mine). Conversely, when “things” is replaced with the word “thoughts,” the passage suggests that the “cause” of life can perceive abstract ideas, produced and existing only within the mind. Yet like in other passages in “On Life,” this revision does not fully reverse Shelley’s philosophy. As Leader and O’Neill note, neither word was cancelled in Shelley’s manuscript; it is only in the translation from manuscript to copy-text that the word “things” vanishes, relegated to a footnote. Shelley also includes a short sentence that is seemingly intended to clarify the definitions of these terms: “the word things is to be understood as any object of thought” (636). In this final sentence, the word “things” refers to both “objects,” material entities, but also “thoughts,” seemingly dematerialized and abstract ideas. This revision underscores Shelley’s attempt to merge materialism and idealism, but also reveals that his conceptual muddying is most apparent when visible, shown through his revisions to the manuscript. Thus, when Jerome McGann asserts that “a powerful case could be made for producing an edition of Shelley’s Complete Poetical Works in which the copy-text for the poems would be, in almost all cases, the manuscripts,” the same also can be said for Shelley’s prose (Critique of Modern 109). The copy-text of “On Life” contributes to conflicting, contradictory versions of something called “life,” and reinforces that, for Shelley, there is no a single definition of the concept.

But the fragmented ideas about how to define “life” conflict with Shelley’s interest in the “unity” of “intellectual philosophy” (635). When he warns men of becoming “mechanical and habitual agents,” Shelley reflects back on the “reverie” that often exists during childhood (635). He cherishes an outlook where an individual, who I refer to using female pronouns and will appears unattributed in Shelley’s essay, but is actually a quotation of Satan from Milton’s Paradise Lost.
address more below, understands herself and her surroundings as “one mass” and even feels as if her “nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into [her] being” (635). By tracing the childhood “reverie” that often “decays” into a force that is “mechanical and habitual,” Shelley suggests the need for spontaneity or, as “reverie” is defined, “senses relating to wild or uncontrolled behavior” (“reverie, n.”). While “wild” and “uncontrolled” typically carry negative connotations, this unpredictability is framed positively in “On Life.” Fluid, seemingly indefinable behavior allows the individual to recognize her enmeshment with her surroundings.

It is the entanglement between humans and “the surrounding universe,” then, that becomes central to Shelleyan “unity” (635). In his description of a state of reverie, Shelley explains that individuals “feel” as though “their nature” and surroundings are entities that can, respectively, be “dissolved” or “absorbed.” The processes of dissolving and absorbing are most frequently used in modern discourse to describe the changes in physical states of matter, such as when a group of atoms or molecules are incorporated into a separate material object. In “On Life,” to be “dissolved” or “absorbed” instead suggests that matter is metaphysically permeable and penetrable, where our perception of matter changes rather than the material itself. Kenneth Neill Cameron elucidates this distinction between materiality and perception when he writes that “On Life” reflects Shelley’s larger rejection of a materialist philosophy in favor of idealism throughout his writings (“Philosophy” 580). If we follow Cameron’s argument that Shelley pivots from materialism to idealism, we can note that, for Percy Shelley, the entanglement of the human and her environment is not material, but a mode of thought; the human and her environment become continuously intertwined in a way that diminishes the monumental scale of the world and also dissipates anthropocentric power. “For Shelley,” Marilyn Gaull writes,
“everything breathes, participates in the cycle” (586). “On Life” indeed promotes something called “life” that enmeshes “everything” in the cycle, a single collection of all things, animate and inanimate (586).

To say that everything “breathes,” however, returns to a definition of “life” that is clearly rooted in material, physiological processes. Instead, it might be possible that Shelley’s version of “life” is rooted in the coalescence between human and her nonhuman surroundings. It is key to consider the human as her, someone who is described using feminine pronouns. Although the essay never explicitly addresses the genders of the individuals it references, such as the artist, “On Life” relies on gendered language as Shelley oscillates between materialism and idealism. As I signal earlier in this chapter, Shelley depicts “life” as feminine, beginning with his description of the artist’s images of “the grass and the flowers” (633). He details the “colours which attend the setting and rising sun” and the “hues of the atmosphere” before concluding that these images should culminate in an “intense delight” (633). While these words hint at a delicacy and sensitivity stereotypically associated with female emotion, Shelley offers an even more explicit image in the following passage. After questioning “What is life?,” he declares, “We are born, and our birth is unremembered and infancy remembered only in fragments” (633). Life, in this instance, is not defined by a core feature or characteristic, but rather is framed as the result of the feminine process of giving “birth.” Immediately following this association between “life” and “birth,” Shelley continues on to declare, “How vain it is to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being” (633). For Shelley, language is unable to fully explain or demystify the concept of “life.” If we continue to interrogate the gendered connotations of Shelley’s language, the use of “penetrate,” which suggests sexual intercourse, marks the demystification of “life” as

While these various contradictions—materialist and idealist, material and immaterial, feminine and masculine—might initially seem to muddy Shelley’s text, we can continue to examine each binary as a way of redefining “life” (Arnold xxi). In contrast with Matthew Arnold’s classification of Shelley as an “ineffectual angel,” Shelley’s “On Life” ultimately reveals that “life” is malleable and adaptable, able to exist between seemingly polarized concepts. As I address concepts of futurity in the next chapter, we can now begin to consider how these various forms of “life” are preserved and memorialized.
Chapter 3

Monuments for the Future: Matter in The Last Man and “Ozymandias”

At the culmination of Mary Shelley’s The Last Man (1826), Lionel Verney addresses the environment’s slow destruction and loss of “all powers of generation and sustenance” before concluding, “Do this, sad-visaged power, while I write, while eyes read these pages. And who will read them?” (348). In an effort to preserve a record of his existence, Verney writes a book that describes his life and the death of humankind in the year 2100. Yet despite the alleged end of humanity, Verney’s text does not disappear into a future, reader-less vacuum: It appears as a sibylline prophecy that Mary Shelley herself claims to read in 1818. Verney’s story—embedded in The Last Man—also circulated among Shelley’s contemporaries, though these Romantic readers were likely not of the temperament that Verney imagined when invoking the “sad-visaged power” (348). One anonymous review of The Last Man in an 1826 issue of The Monthly Review proclaimed:

The descriptions of the operations of the pestilence are particularly objectionable for their minuteness. It is not a picture which she gives us, but a lecture in anatomy, in which every part of the human frame is laid bare to the eye, in its most putrid state of corruption. In this part of her subject, as indeed in every other, she amplifies beyond all bounds of moderation. We are reluctantly obliged to pronounce the work a decided failure. (“Notices”)
The review dismisses *The Last Man* as a “decided failure” because Shelley’s descriptions of the plague are laced with “minuteness” that exceeds “all bounds of moderation.” But by acknowledging this attention to detail and prolongation of the novel’s form, the review also unintentionally reveals one of *The Last Man*’s greatest achievements. Given the length of the *The Last Man*—told between the “Author’s Introduction,” scattered sibylline leaves, and Verney’s book—human extinction appears trivial within its numerous textual layers.

In addition to the text of Verney’s narrative, these textual layers significantly include Shelley’s own composition of *The Last Man*, her “first major literary work” following her husband’s death in 1822 (Bickley viii). By the time of *The Last Man*’s publication, Mary Shelley was a familiar author to contemporary audiences. As I address in chapter one, *Frankenstein* was published anonymously when it was initially distributed in 1818 (St. Clair 359). Although only 500 copies of the novel were in circulation, *Frankenstein* eventually drew the attention of a local theater, where it was adapted into a stage production. Shelley’s father, William Godwin, used the popularity of this production to secure a printing agreement for a second edition in 1823, which was officially attributed to Mary Shelley (St. Clair 360). Explaining *Frankenstein*’s popularity in a letter to Leigh Hunt, Shelley confides, “I found myself famous” (Bennett 417). Accordingly, Shelley was able to publish *The Last Man* with little complication, making the novel a significant source of income as Shelley supported herself and her child, Percy Florence, through writing.8

---

7 The anonymous author of another 1826 review in *The Ladies’ monthly museum* expresses similar frustrations with *The Last Man*. The review criticizes, “We should be better pleased to see [Shelley] exercise her powers of intellect on subjects less removed from nature and probability” (“Book Review”). Although by the mid-twentieth century critics hailed *The Last Man* as an “entirely new genre” and “second only to *Frankenstein,*” these anonymous reviews are representative of Shelley’s generally unfavorable contemporaries (Spark 2; Luke, Jr. vii).

8 In contrast with *Frankenstein*’s complicated and well-known publication history, there is surprisingly little discussion about the publication of *The Last Man*. Hugh J. Luke, Jr. writes that Henry Colburn “eventually” published *The Last Man* as three volumes in 1826 (xi). Although
Shelley’s newfound literary fame, Pamela Bickley writes, helped her feel “validated in her imaginative writing” and further, allowed her to think about “the subject matter of The Last Man and the ways in which her own intense feelings of bereavement could be fused in fictional form with the apocalyptic vision of plague” (vii). For critics including Bickley, Mary Shelley’s “feelings of bereavement” emerge as a direct correlation between characters of The Last Man and historical figures: “Adrian, an idealised portrait of Percy Shelley, and Raymond, a thinly disguised [Lord] Byron” and even Verney, a proxy for Shelley herself (vii). Gregory O’Dea even asserts that Shelley’s novel is “rarely discussed except as a kind of (auto)biographical monument,” particularly in light of her Percy Shelley’s unexpected death (283). O’Dea continues on to suggest that critics abandon a purely biographical investigation of The Last Man as these readings “resist the thought that Shelley had ideas to examine independent of her circumstances and acquaintances” (284). While O’Dea’s description of the “(auto)biographical monument” frames Shelley’s novel as a dramatization of her biography, the co-mingling of Shelley’s fiction and life can allow for a reading of The Last Man that locates her text in conversation with—and as a response to—her husband’s work and troubles the conventions of biographical criticism as such.

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the theories of materiality in Mary Shelley’s The Last Man are in opposition with those of Percy Shelley, namely in his poem “Ozymandias” (1818). What is the impact of writing about dematerialized bodies—the novel’s now-dead plague victims—to preserve them through material text? What ways does this differ from a failed attempt to memorialize human exceptionalism in the form of a statue? Where “Ozymandias”

“eventually” implies that Shelley had unsuccessful negotiations with publishers before reaching an agreement with Colburn, there is no discernable record of other possible attempts to publish The Last Man.
suggests that matter is subject to decay, I conclude that *The Last Man* creates a textual futurity that can exist beyond processes of material decomposition. Verney’s narrative, which he composes retrospectively after the extinction of humanity, preserves the legacy of the dead plague victims that are otherwise disintegrating; by memorializing these bodies through text, *The Last Man* collapses otherwise linear processes of life, aging toward a telos of death, into a fixed, static framework, removed from a sequential ordering of time.

To consider the relationship between matter and monumentality in Shelley’s *The Last Man*, this chapter will first establish the temporality that defines the novel’s plot. As Timothy Ruppert writes, “Verney’s narrative is in reality the composite product of three minds separated by more than two thousand years” (144). *The Last Man* begins with a fictional “Author’s Introduction,” where an unnamed author—implied to be Mary Shelley—describes a trip to Naples in 1818. After visiting the Cumaean Sibyl’s “gloomy cavern,” the author discovers ancient, scattered leaves containing the written fragments of a prophecy (1). Where she recounts collating these leaves into Lionel Verney’s narrative that follows, the author also emphasizes her need to “add links, and model the work into a consistent form” (4). This adds an additional layer of mediation to Verney’s account as it has been edited from a cluster of ostensibly nonlinear fragments into a single, chronological narrative. The pieces of written text therefore become a material site of temporal disjunction: antiquity’s prophecy of the future that Verney writes as events of his past.

Set in the late twenty-first century, Verney’s narrative then recounts the slow unfolding of a catastrophic plague across England. In each of the novel’s three volumes, Verney reveals new destruction in the world; however, the plague does not appear in England until almost halfway through the narrative. The first volume is actually a description of the characters’ lives
before the disease. Most significantly, Verney reflects on his childhood as an “unprotected orphan” in a state of pastoralism that resembles Shelley’s nineteenth-century (Shelley, The Last Man 9). He lingers on idyllic descriptions of nature, like the “sea-surrounded nook, a cloud-enshadowed land … the surface of the globe, with its shoreless ocean and trackless continents,” before introducing his companions: Perdita, Raymond, Adrian, Evadne, and Idris (5). It is only in the second two volumes of The Last Man that Verney reveals each character’s death and mourns that humanity will be “merely passed into other shapes” (330).

Verney’s lament separates the concept of legacy from material of the body and instead suggests an attempt to preserve human culture and history for a future readership. Kari E. Lokke explains that this act of preservation is an antidote to assuage Verney’s grief over human extinction with her declaration: “Art sheds a comforting light on the dark world of the irrational” (132). Lokke frames the production of text exclusively as “art” and further implies that Verney’s text intends to elicit an emotional response from another human. Yet there is no audience for the art. Verney acknowledges this detail when he travels to Rome, where he finds the fragments of an unfinished manuscript. He quickly declares:

I also will write a book, I cried – for whom to read? – to whom dedicated? And then with silly flourish (what so capricious and childish as despair?) I wrote,

DEDICATION

TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD.

SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL!

BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE

LAST MAN (371)
Like the sibylline leaves, Verney’s dedication reveals the collapse of time. In explicitly dedicating his book to the “illustrious dead,” Verney associates his text with bodies that are devoid of life and sequestered to history. But as he continues on to write, “Shadows, arise, and read your fall!,” Verney seems to relocate these bodies to the present. Where shadows are presumably referencing the dead—invoking images of a fleeting human silhouette—Verney commands these shadows to “arise” across time. The dead shadows are distanced from their prior existence as they are told to read about their own demise. Moreover, in shifting from the verb “arise” to reading of the “fall,” this line mimics an active, vertical motion before reaching its culminating exclamation point. The final phrase then returns to a sense of stasis as it orders the dead to “Behold the history of the last man.” While the shadows are called to action to “behold,” Verney once again turns their focus to “the history” that catalogs events of the past. Simultaneously referencing the past, present, and future, Verney’s dedication exemplifies Gregory O’Dea’s description of *The Last Man* overall: “a prophetic history in which the future and the past have collapsed into one another, ultimately to become the same thing” (291). In the dedication, dimensions of time are indistinguishable.

But this dedication in the copy-text of *The Last Man* is visually distinguished from its surrounding text. Once Verney begins to quote from his own book, the font switches to all capital letters. The dedication is also printed as a centered block quote, which separates it from all other text of *The Last Man*. This minor typographical change creates a visual break in Verney’s narrative and, accordingly, forces the reader to consider the relationship of this short stanza to the rest of the novel. As we read of Verney’s decision to write “the history of the last man,” the dedication crystallizes that we have been reading his book *all along* (371). The quote becomes a meta-reflection on Verney’s act of composition. But while Verney recounts that he
“wrote” the dedication in the past tense—implying that he is still alive to reflect on the act—he is dead, but also not yet born at the time when Mary Shelley receives the prophesy through sibylline leaves (371). Where O’Dea writes that “Verney begins to dispose of traditional time,” time simultaneously seems to dispose of Verney (296). He exists only as a trace that can be reconstructed from his writings, which seem to encapsulate the past, present, and future at once.

Despite recognizing the lack of audience for his writing, Verney continues on to stress, “I will write and leave in this most ancient city, this ‘world’s sole monument’, a record of these things. I will leave a monument of the existence of Verney, the Last Man” (372). While “record” implies a factual index of human history, the word “monument” cements Verney’s narrative as a point of grandeur. Defined as a “statue, building, or other structure erected to commemorate a famous or notable person or event,” a monument goes beyond text, where words are confined to a flattened page. It is a dimensional object that concretizes a legacy. Yet monument can also be defined as a “tomb, a sepulcher”: a vault for burying the dead that is aimed at the future (“monument”).

This concept of the monument, intended to commemorate “the existence” of a human figure, also appears in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” written and published nearly six years before The Last Man (Shelley, The Last Man 372). The poem, as Walter Stephens explains, was “written quickly, and in friendly competition” with fellow poet Horace Smith after the pair agreed to write sonnets based on the phrase “Ozymandias, King of Kings” (156). Both poems were published over two weeks in January 1818 in Leigh Hunt’s magazine, The Examiner (Stephens 156). Shelley’s poem tells the story of a traveler “from an antique land” who finds the remnants of a statue, now in ruins (Shelley, “Ozymandias” 1). The speaker of “Ozymandias” relays the traveler’s story:
[…] Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert…. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed; (2-7)

Unlike Verney’s attempts to preserve human legacy in The Last Man, “Ozymandias” attempts to recreate it by reproducing the human form. The statue of the titular “Ozymandias” resembles a human body, with its “legs,” “visage,” and “wrinkled lip.” Yet, indicated by words like “trunkless,” “shattered,” and “half sunk,” this intended memorial to the “King of Kings” is disintegrating and fragmented across the desert (10). The slow crumbling of the stone—a process made visible by the numerous pieces strewn around the base of the statue—reveals the statue’s material fragility and inability to endure over time. This disintegration is thrown into sharper relief when the speaker describes the inscription on the statue’s pedestal. It reads, “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!” (10-11). Particularly given the emphasis on “King of Kings,” capitalized as if it was an honorific, the inscription here positions the statue as a monument to human grandeur. Yet, this attempt falls flat in light of the final lines of the poem: “Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away” (12-14). For Shelley, there is “nothing” left of human legacy but discarded remnants that will eventually become disintegrated fragments.
Percy Shelley’s theory of matter in “Ozymandias” suggests that physical decay is an inevitable process. As revealed by the inscription on the statue’s pedestal, even those memorials modeled after “Kings of Kings” are subject to this slow, crumbling form of disintegration (Shelley, “Ozymandias” 10). Yet, when put in contrast with Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, we can see the difference between these two materialities. Where “Ozymandias” indicates that human legacy can *only* be preserved through a material object, *The Last Man* reveals a textual futurity that—although compromised without the presence of an audience for the text—can outlive those processes of material decay. As I turn to the examination of the digital Shelley-Godwin Archive in chapter four, we can consider the ways in which the digital archive magnifies and even distorts these processes of preservation that define the lifespan of the material text.
In the previous chapters, I have shown the materialized process of textual production, the malleability of “life,” and the futurity of textual matter. In this chapter, I turn to the markup languages that seemingly dematerialize the *Frankenstein* manuscripts to show the traffic between idealist and materialist notions of matter. We can begin after the famous animation of the creation in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), when Victor Frankenstein observes that the creature’s “skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries” (39). The external layer of tissue is stretched just thin enough to suggest—without fully revealing—how the body parts have been sutured together and enable the creation of life. The Shelley-Godwin Archive, which includes the digital papers of Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William Godwin, mimics this process of aggregation as it collects materials from multiple textual bodies or *corpora* to produce new, vital matter. It presents manuscripts from Shelley’s *Frankenstein* using the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), a markup schema that standardizes the encoding of machine-readable texts, and consequently allows for this essay’s examination of what we might think of as the novel’s muscles and arteries: its textual history.

This textual history is familiar to many readers. As I describe in chapter one, it begins with Shelley’s short story of “imperfect animation,” which she recast into a novel that was published in 1818 followed by a second edition in 1823 and third edition in 1831 (“Author’s Introduction” 196). Although each version underwent revisions, the most extensive occurred in the drafts that constitute the first edition: these involved input from publishers, Shelley’s literary
circle, and what William St. Clair calls the “collaborative help” of Percy Shelley (357). Where a physical manuscript collapses this intellectual history into a static object and therefore provides the illusion of a single authorial agent, I argue that the Shelley-Godwin Archive shows a multiplicity of agents. The digital platform exposes the temporality, process, and fragmentation that in fact characterized the text’s composition; this characterization positions *Frankenstein* as a diverse assemblage, much like the creature it depicts. As a result, the Shelley-Godwin Archive dismantles the notion of authorship as a single act and instead models a distributed, ecological mode of writing.

It might initially appear as though this ecological understanding of writing diffuses authorship so widely as to eliminate the concept entirely. When Roland Barthes writes that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author,” he declares that authorial intent limits possible interpretations of text and incites readers to consider text independent of the author (148). Thus readers are able to follow the text to its “destination,” rather than seeking a narrowly isolated authorial meaning (148). Michel Foucault offers an alternative when he troubles the “relationship between text and author” without proposing that text is wholly isolated and devoid of influences from the author (205). Instead, he suggests that the “author function will disappear” and be replaced by questions of textual circulation, previous use, and “room for possible subjects” (222). Foucault’s version of authorship accounts for the author while considering her in a much larger system that surrounds the production and continued existence of her work. Yet this system remains abstract and opaque; the bounds of Foucault’s proposed discourse are never specified and leave the possibility that the text is informed by an infinite number of forces. This chapter dissects the materiality of *Frankenstein* on the Shelley-Godwin
Archive to delimit the scope of Shelley’s ecology but also reveal the breadth of the digital, textual network.

In its physical operation alone, the Shelley-Godwin Archive (S-GA) involves a growing cluster of individuals and institutions. It began in 2011 as a collaborative project between the New York Public Library and the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, and also includes materials from the Bodleian, Huntington, British, and Houghton Libraries (Muñoz and Viglianti 2). Although Neil Fraistat, Raffaele Viglianti, and Elizabeth C. Denlinger are listed as the project’s current co-general editors, the team of people who have contributed to the project is much larger. The “Contributors” section lists 11 current staff, 52 past staff, and 37 encoding contributors in addition to 17 advisory board members who are attached to 23 institutions (Fraistat et al., “About”). Trevor Muñoz and Raffaele Viglianti, two current staff members, write that the team “completed its first phase of work in 2015,” which implies that there are other phases of work that still have not been released (2). The project is constantly evolving, even though this dynamism is undetectable upon a first glance at the archive’s website.

Rather than emphasizing its incompletion, the S-GA attempts to recreate the appearance of a physical book, which paradoxically associates intangible digital text with ostensibly unchanging archival materials. The landing page of the website—a marbled cream that imitates the appearance of paper—presents three distinct segments under the main toolbar: a banner, an “About the Archive” statement, and “Featured Works.” Every five seconds a new image slides

---

9 The S-GA does not list any dates indicating when the project started or finished its first phase of work. While there is a color-coded system to indicate transcription status (red if no encoded transcription is available, yellow if the transcription is created but not vetted, and green if the transcription is created and vetted), the absence of dates contributes to the archive’s positioning as an ongoing, even permanent project (Fraistat et al., “Using the Archive”). It is also worth noting that although the project is the result of partnerships between multiple institutions, it is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and The Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation (Fraistat et al., “About”).
across the banner, rotating among images of a *Frankenstein* draft notebook, an engraved frontispiece, and handwriting samples superimposed onto profiles of Mary Shelley and her family members. Beneath a subheading, the “Featured Works” section also displays images that point toward *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) and *Frankenstein*, making the textual focus of the page an informational statement in the bottom corner. The first sentence announces, “The Shelley-Godwin Archive will provide the digitized manuscripts of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, William Godwin, and Mary Wollstonecraft, bringing together online for the first time ever the widely dispersed handwritten legacy of this uniquely gifted family of writers” (Fraistat et al., “About the Archive”). While the archive currently contains several manuscripts, the phrase “will provide” continuously looks ahead to future developments and suggests that the project is always ongoing, even permanent in its certainty that it will provide. Likewise, the statement’s use of a present participle emphasizes its still-happening action of “bringing together” the Shelley-Godwin family’s manuscripts. This unexpected detail of grammatical tense subtly reinforces the project’s aim of not only presenting archival materials but also collating them into one collection.

There are different versions of this same explanatory, seemingly cursory sentence—such as the one under the “Project Introduction” that changes “will provide” to “provides” and “bringing together” to “aiming to unite”—but each recasting similarly promotes a totalizing, authoritative text (Fraistat et al., “About”). Where the SG-A writes about the unification of manuscripts, the statement echoes Julie A. Carlson’s commentary on members of Shelley’s family that positions “their lives and writings as inextricably connected,” as she sees “each [individual] as not only facilitating but also undermining the other” (3). Carlson’s coupling of “lives and writing,” which even names the family’s lives before their writings, becomes an
attempt to reconcile the authors as historical individuals and create the image, as the S-GA describes, of a “uniquely gifted family” (Fraistat et al., “About the Archive”). Consequently, the focus becomes not only on the textual materials of the archive but also on the collection of writers behind them who are connected but unable to be understood as a homogenous “figure.”

The archive’s repeated rhetorical emphasis on handwriting further inscribes traces of authorship onto the digital archive. Images of handwriting are embedded into the archive’s banner, the informational statement explicitly notes the family’s “handwritten legacy,” and the archive as a whole provides images of the Shelley family’s written manuscripts (Fraistat et al., “About the Archive”). Yet the physicality of handwriting is seemingly at odds with the material of the digital platform. The manuscript pages are flattened into a single dimension and no longer exist as a tangible, multidimensional object that a reader can hold or move. Instead, they are digital images—composed of physical material, like electricity, not always apparent to the reader—that have been deliberately staged and organized, such as with the manuscript pages that have been photographed next to a yellow ruler on a black backdrop, only able to be viewed one at a time. As the physical manuscript can never be fully captured on a screen, this curation of the image of handwriting suggests that handwriting might not be the sole marker of authorship; other elements, like how the handwriting is framed and presented, also inform how readers will experience the words on a page.

But the reader is also given agency to shape her own experience in the S-GA. There are several layers of textual mediation that separate these spectral images of handwriting and the text of the novel. Upon deciding to “Explore the Archive,” the reader is offered a doubled method of reading: by work, “with manuscript pages re-organized in the linear order of the work,” or by manuscript, “with pages in their physical order” (Fraistat et al., “Explore the Archive”). The
reader must tell the computer how it will render the set of manuscript pages. She therefore
experiences what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call the logic of hypermediacy, where the
reader becomes aware of the medium by “repeatedly redefining the visual and conceptual
relationships among mediated spaces—relationships that may range from simple juxtaposition to
complete absorption” (42). This “redefining”—which here emerges simply by clicking through
screens to move deeper into the archive—is continuous and further creates a disorienting
visualization of a text already fragmented into multiple manuscripts and volumes. It is only from
choosing to read the novel in its “linear order” that the reader reaches the novel itself (Fraistat et
al., “Explore the Archive”). After selecting one of three volumes and a chapter nested within a
drop down menu, thumbnail images of the Bodleian Library’s manuscript appear. Clicking one
of the thumbnails finally opens the “handwritten legacy” next to a digital transcription (Fraistat
et al., “About the Archive”).

Thus the Frankenstein manuscripts are only made visible when they involve the
participation of both the reader and S-GA editor, ostensibly providing a structure for the text as it
is read. Once the reader selects a page to view the S-GA displays an image of the manuscript
page alongside the default Standard View, a transcription that visually renders the text encoding:
The text that appears above is encoded using TEI, a computing language that is designed to make humanities texts machine-readable. TEI is derivative of Extensible Markup Language (XML), another markup language used for document encoding. In accordance with XML, TEI can be described as “a formal model that is based on an ordered hierarchy” (Birnbaum). This “ordered hierarchy” can be less formally described as a tree (Birnbaum). By contrast to Percy Shelley’s tree sketch that precedes “On Life”—where life appears rooted, yet unbounded—the hierarchical tree of TEI imposes limits on digital text. Tags are nested within one another to set up a system of organization within which an individual can utilize markup (Birnbaum). For example: you can mark up chapters of a novel with <div> tags to tell the computer that these chapters are smaller.

---

10 The TEI is also the name of the consortium that has collectively determined the guidelines discussed in this chapter. As the existence of this group might suggest, these guidelines are actively reviewed and revised on a regular basis. P5, the latest version of the TEI’s guidelines, was released in November 2007 and is updated biannually. For more thorough descriptions of TEI elements and their functions see: [www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/index.html](http://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/index.html).
divisions of one source text. Within each <div> tag, you can have <p> tags to indicate individual paragraphs. Since the <p> tag is a smaller element than a <div> tag, <p> tags must go within the <div> tags; you cannot have a <p> tag that encompasses anything outside of one set of <div> tags. Accordingly, if you encode one paragraph within a chapter, you also must encode every other paragraph within that chapter in order to have well-formed TEI and to indicate that each of the smaller elements (paragraphs) belong to a larger element (a chapter). The TEI thus is a technology of hierarchization that charts a logic onto the text.

TEI can range in function from descriptive to presentational markup, meaning that it can be intended, respectively, to describe “what a textual subcomponent is” and “what text looks like” (Birnbaum). These approaches suggest that TEI markup is intended to explain a pre-existing or natural structure within a document, and, further, that using an inherent structure to categorize segments of text within an ordered hierarchy is logical. Yet, as Jerome McGann explains, markup languages “do not easily—perhaps do not even naturally—map to the markup that pervades paper-based texts” (“Marking Texts” 199). Digital schemes cannot correlate to the structure of paper-based texts because there is no natural structure to begin with; when made digital the text’s original structural instability is only magnified.

If we strip a project down to what appears as plain text, the text still relies on binary code in order to appear in a readable format online. N. Katherine Hayles writes that this presence of binary code, plain text, and textual markup results in a constant oscillation between different layers as viewers engage with a digital text. She observes that advanced programming languages “translate this basic mechanic level of signification [a binary base] into commands that more closely resemble natural language. The translation from binary code into high-level languages…back into binary code must happen every time commands are compiled or
interpreted…” (45). Particularly with the emphasis that a translation happens every time
“commands are compiled or interpreted,” digital texts continuously change between what we see
to what the computer can sort as a means of bridging the divide between any “natural language”
and one that can be processed mechanically. Yet it is only an editor that can determine how these
continuous, fluctuating languages are made visible. The Frankenstein manuscripts can only be
seen and perceived as digital matter after someone creates a command to translate them into a
human-readable language.

Tags for deletions in the creation’s final speech—its already grappling with what it
means to remove or erase life—demonstrate how these commands function. When the creation
announces that he has murdered numerous people, the Standard View renders the line as follows:

strangled strangled the innocent as they slept, & grasped

The TEI-encoded version of this line appears below:

<line><mod>
  <del rend="overwritten"><del rend="smear"><unclear
           reason="illegible">strangled</unclear></del></del>
  <add place="intralinear">strangled</add>
</mod> the innocent as they slept, & grasped</line> (Shelley, “Frankenstein, MS.
Abinger C. 58, 28v”)

The archive displays these tags using blue, purple, and green text, which visually reinforces how
each tag is expanded. The blue signals the tag element, the purple signals an attribute name, and
the green signals the attribute value; the element here can serve as a broad category and the
attribute name and value further explain how the element is being employed (Birnbaum). This
line also shows the nesting of tags in an ordered hierarchy. Within the <line> tag, the <mod> tag
allows for any type of modification to the text that appears inside of the angled brackets. Even more detailed, the <del> tag, which the TEI defines as “contain[ing] a letter, word, or passage deleted, marked as deleted, or otherwise indicated as superfluous or spurious in the copy text by an author, scribe, or a previous annotator or corrector,” is used twice: “rend=overwritten” and “rend=smeared” allow the computer to mark the word “strangled” as both overwritten and smeared (“del”). The final tag within this string, <unclear reason = “illegible”>, is an interpretative mark that does not communicate information from the text itself, but instead notes why the <del> tag was used. The <del> tag is a small moment of erasure that shows a larger process of authorial revision, where small chunks of what we might call dead textual matter are reshaped into a new, cohesive body.

These deletions and their replacements—the slow revision of one textual piece into another—are not limited to Shelley’s writing in a particular moment in time. In fact, there is no clear way to determine when the mark was inscribed on the physical manuscript or who made the decision to encode the deletion. The TEI’s definition of a deletion encompasses “an author, scribe, or a previous annotator or corrector,” which means that any one of the 100 total staff members who have worked on the S-GA could have inserted this tag since 2011 (“del”; Fraistat et al., “About”). There also is the possibility that the tag itself could change over time: if a future scholar decides that this deletion is not, for example, smeared, but instead erased, this change in coding category alters the text and the reader’s experience of it. But these tags, like the words in the physical manuscript, have no visible trace when they are rewritten; the changes can ostensibly occur without a reader noticing at all if they happen gradually. Although the <del> appears as a minor alteration, the consequences build if repeated on a large scale throughout the document.
The context of this further complicates the stability of *Frankenstein* as text that can be traced to a single writer. The beginning of the passage includes a header, which provides descriptive information about the subsequent text:

```xml
<zone type="pagination"><line>185</line></zone>
<zone type="library"><line>29</line></zone>
<zone type="main">
  <handShift medium="pen" new="#pbs") (Shelley, “Frankenstein, MS. Abinger C. 58, 28v”)
  The first three lines provide information regarding the pagination and structure of the page within the context of the entire manuscript. The tag `<handShift medium="pen" new="#pbs">` imbeds descriptors of the physical manuscript directly into the encoded transcription, where the TEI describes the element “handShift” as “mark[ing] the beginning of a sequence of text written in a new hand, or the beginning of a scribal stint” (“handShift”). In this usage, “handShift” has two attribute names and values: “medium=’pen’” and “new=’#pbs’.” The attribute “medium=’pen’,,” which simply describes that the writing of this page was produced in pen, is consistently present in headers throughout the manuscript. It functions like a standardized font and provides a level of consistency throughout the document that contrasts with other more unstable aspects.

Unlike “pen,” the attribute “new” provides data that determines authorship or, at minimum, the literal hand that penned the text. In the header above, the value “#pbs” signals that the writing from the corresponding page in the physical manuscript was predominantly written by Percy Shelley rather than Shelley herself. However, slightly later in this passage there is a modification of this tag:

```xml
<line>curious & unhallowed <mod>
```
As marked by the “hand='#mws,'” Mary Shelley penned only one word on the entirety of this page: wretch. This word suggests a compassionate, humanizing portrayal of a character often labeled as a grotesque monster in the novel. Within the manuscripts in their entirety, Shelley is attributed to writing this particular word fifty-seven times to her husband’s three (The Shelley-Godwin Archive). The disparity between the two writers’ usage of the word “wretch” suggests that they had wholly different readings of Frankenstein’s creation. If we follow this line of thought, it could produce vastly distinct arguments about the text based on whose hand the reader values more within the manuscript. Within this passage, this meaning of the text is determined by the reader’s agreement with the frequent association of the word “wretch” with Frankenstein’s creation. A reader must further question if tags like “#pbs” or “#mws” can serve as facts as they concretely declare that Percy of Mary Shelley respectively wrote the correspondingly encoded words of the manuscript. While results of handwriting analysis can be corroborated, it is reasonable that there could be inaccuracies or mistakes; the tags may inaccurately chart details about the materiality of the physical manuscript onto the digital text.11

This encoding, however, remains an editorial decision. It provides readers with information that immediately filters segments of the text based on how markup is used. Yet the

---

11 As I note in chapter one, the Shelley-Godwin Archive uses Charles E. Robinson’s research on handwriting analysis from The Frankenstein Notebooks to determine the presence of a <handShift>.
S-GA also allows readers to engage with this encoding in multiple ways. There is a toggle function that appears above the image of the physical manuscript and encoded transcriptions:

![Limit View](image)

Figure 3. Limit View on Shelley-Godwin Archive. (*The Shelley-Godwin Archive*)

With this function, readers are able to isolate Mary or Percy Shelley’s contributions to *Frankenstein* as the Limit View function renders every segment encoded with “#mws” or “#pbs” in a red font when selected in the menu; the text not marked up with this attribute value is rendered in a light, nearly transparent grey. As readers move back and forth between each of the three view options, the text is repeatedly altered, resulting in multiple modes of reading the manuscript. One might read entirely for Mary or Percy Shelley’s contributions to the text or toggle between each of the three options for every page. The reader therefore has the agency to manipulate how the manuscript appears within the limits of the S-GA’s tools. Building on N. Katherine Hayles’s description that a shift “from binary code into high-level languages…back into binary code must happen every time commands are compiled or interpreted,” the digital archive shows that the *Frankenstein* manuscripts are in flux on at least two levels: when readers actively manipulate the manuscript, such as with the Limit View function, and when the binary code correspondingly (and invisibly) changes underneath the surface of the project (45). While it is possible for an individual to change Limit View from All to Mary Shelley to All again, *Frankenstein* has fundamentally changed. Although the text might appear on the second viewing of All as it did on the first, the binary code is not the same, identical string of digitals but merely a recastened imitation of its initial rendering.
"Frankenstein" is continuously in flux as readers can engage with its encoding to analyze the text. Even further, the markup often warrants readers’ participation to interpret the text in order to fully understand its meaning. This can result from gaps in information within the original, physical manuscript that prevent its transcription—much less markup—once transferred to the digital archive. The final pages of the *Frankenstein* manuscripts include several clusters marked as damaged, where below is a single sentence rendered in the archive’s Standard View:

```xml
<line><damage/>al that with which I regard myself. I look</line>
<line><damage/> the hands which executed that deed, I think</line>
<line><damage/> the heart in which the imagination of it was</line>
<line><damage/>ncieved, & long for the moment when they will</line>
<line><damage/>et my eyes, when it will haunt my thoughts</line>
<line><damage/>o more.</line> (Shelley, “Frankenstein, MS. Abinger C. 58, 29r)
```

The TEI explains that the `<damage/>` tag “contains an area of damage to the text witness” (“damage”). Though in the encoded sentence this might initially suggest a malfunction in the code or error in how the text is rendered, `<damage/>` quite literally marks the physical harm to the manuscript, impairing its readability and therefore value to the text as a whole. The tag does not generate anything in the archive’s Standard View of the text to signal that there is damage to the original manuscript. Rather, when lines are rendered without the visible encoding, there are repeated, unpredictable jumps in logic within the sentence, necessitating that readers pause long enough to realize words, parts of words, or entire phrases are missing. As an individual reads through the transcribed version of this manuscript, she must speculate the content of missing fragments in order to fully read the passage. It is almost guaranteed, however, that each reader will not make the same judgment on what words are absent and how these absences alter the
text’s meaning. As a result, the <damage/> tag requires each reader to impress their own meaning onto the text and allows the digital *Frankenstein* to exist only as it is interactively interpreted by its readers.

Through its continual, often simultaneous involvement of author, editor, and reader, the Shelley-Godwin Archive undoubtedly reframes what it means to interact with and become a part of the digital archive. Yet this distributed authorship has even larger implications on the text of *Frankenstein* and the way in which its seemingly cohesive exterior hardly masks the glimmer of its metaphorical textual muscles and arteries—that is, the dynamic processes of composition and revision (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 39). Based on the materials that it includes, the S-GA most notably reveals that the novel will always remain incomplete and fragmented. Although the archive includes three sections of the *Frankenstein* manuscripts—appearing as volumes one, two, and three—none appear in full. It would be impossible for the S-GA to present the text in its entirety: Only 87% of the first edition drafts are extant, which indicates a margin of the story that can never be recovered and assimilated into the archive (Fraistat et al., “Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus”). Moreover, the drafts that do exist are not entirely distinct from one another. Volumes two and three contain overlapping material with minor changes throughout the pages as they reflect Shelley’s process of revising the 1818 novel, spread across three volumes, into a more succinct two-volume narrative (St. Clair 360). Even today, both the two- and three-volume versions are circulated as the “standard edition” of the novel, each offering slightly different accounts of Frankenstein’s creation.

The archive also exposes Shelley’s process of revision as an act of overwriting in the manuscripts at large. As Shelley explains in an author’s introduction appended to the revised 1831 edition, she first started writing *Frankenstein* as a part of the now-famous short story
contest with Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and John William Polidori, Byron’s doctor, in 1816 (“Author’s Introduction” 193). Her sketch of the “imperfect animation” began as only a few pages, although it remains at the core of Frankenstein’s narrative (“Author’s Introduction” 196). It was only over the following year that Shelley recast her story into a completed narrative (St. Clair 357). But as with the fragmented and incomplete editions of the novel, the manuscript of this initial short story—and even the earliest drafts that show Shelley’s expansion of the text—has never been found. It was seemingly assimilated into more complete drafts of the first edition, where each version becomes a sort of palimpsest, as traces of each preceding draft seem to exist, as it were, under the surface.

While this recasting of drafts occurred on a large scale across several manuscripts and nearly fifteen years, smaller acts of writing-over what already existed can be seen through marginalia. These visible, handwritten revisions are perhaps the most debated in Frankenstein criticism as they have prompted scholars to argue that Mary and Percy Shelley collaborated on the novel to varying degrees. While marginalia—and Mary Shelley’s statement that the preface was “entirely written by” Percy—supports the idea that both writers did contribute to the manuscripts, many critics have used the textual evidence to contest the novel’s authorship (“Author’s Introduction” 197). In contrast with William St. Clair’s simple acknowledgment that Shelley composed the novel with the “collaborative help” of her husband, individuals like John Lauritsen have tried using this handwriting to argue that Mary Shelley did not write the novel at all (St. Clair 357).

Although the disparities of the Frankenstein manuscripts are magnified when juxtaposed with one another digitally, the lack of cohesion is not unique to the Shelley-Godwin Archive as I show in chapter one. It is intrinsic to Shelley’s novel on its own, with its manuscripts divided
between archives in multiple fragments. Bolter and Grusin’s explanation of hypertext parallels
*Frankenstein*’s disjunction: They discuss hypertext as a “method of organizing and presenting
text in the computer. Textual units of various sizes are presented to the reader in an order that is
determined, at least in part, by the electronic links that the reader chooses to follow. Hypertext is
the remediation of the printed book” (272). While Bolter and Grusin’s emphasis that hypertext is
“the remediation of the printed book” and relies on “electronic links” implies that hypertext can
only be digital, the Shelley-Godwin Archive seems to suggest something different: *Frankenstein*
has been a hypertext all along. It has never existed as a cohesive or even complete object. The
matter of *Frankenstein*—pages of Mary Shelley’s earliest manuscript, Percy Shelley’s ink
splotches, the multiple, republished editions—can never be fully assembled into a single, textual
archive. Consequently, as the novel has been revised and rewritten by multiple hands across
several decades, *Frankenstein* became a remediation of itself.
Coda

Shelley, Networked

Studies of Mary Shelley have long been intertwined with biographical investigations of the author herself, a trend that, as I mention in chapter three, often only examines literature as it relates to historical accounts of Shelley’s literary circle. The examination of Shelley’s personal life has allowed for a deeper understanding of the philosophical and conceptual influences on her work and, as Julie A. Carlson indicates, blurred “the boundaries between person and text, private and public, living and writing, works of literature and works of mourning” (3). But to understand Mary Shelley’s writings as pure remediations or novelizations of her personal life limits the extent to which we can read Shelley’s lasting literary influence. As I have explored throughout this study, Mary Shelley is also entangled in a more complex set of relationships: a material, textual, and vital network that spans her writing and warring theories with Percy Shelley. This network is a dynamic one that merges Shelley’s history of literary production, composition and revisions made visible by her manuscripts, and theories of life and materiality. While, as the title of this thesis suggests, “distributed” can refer to a scattering or dispersing, here it also can indicate an interconnectivity of Shelley within an expanded authorial network.

Of course, contextualizing Mary Shelley within the framework of an expanded network will not fully resolve ongoing debates about the authorship of Frankenstein or reveal an entirely unknown revision to the novel. But if we take nothing else from a study of Shelley, it is that this network allows us to reframe and re-develop our contemporary notions of authorship. In a digital world where text is seemingly created through multiple, concurrent technologies—produced on word processors, displayed with the help of web browsers, and disseminated with a few clicks on
a track pad—authorship is diffused across these various tools and the individuals who use them. To study an authorial network, then, inherently entangles us within it and further begins to dissolve boundaries between author and reader.
Works Cited


“living, adj. and n.1.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2017,


O’Dea, Gregory. “Prophetic History and Textuality in Mary Shelley’s The Last Man.” *Papers on language and literature*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1992, pp. 283-204.


corsair.morganlibrary.org/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&BBRecID=137708&v1=1.


2009, pp. 1-12.