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Screen Memories and Fictionalized
Autobiography: Mary Shelley's *Mathilda* and *The
Mourner*

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I. Fiction and Autobiographical Theories

If exterior space—the stage of the world—is a light, clear space where everyone's behavior, movements, and motives are in plain sight, interior space is shadowy in its very essence.

—Georges Gusdorf

In 1829 Mary Shelley was approached by Edward Trelawny, who was intent on writing a group biography of Byron, Percy Shelley, and himself. As Trelawny well knew, Mary's cooperation with any such project was crucial; Mary, however, was aware of the fact that she had been forbidden to write or collaborate on any writing of Percy's life as long as his father lived and paid her son's allowance. "Shelley's life must be written," she observed, "I hope one day to do it myself" (qtd. in Sunstein 297). As Shelley scholars know, she never did, but I would suggest that throughout certain of her fictions Mary Shelley did write a partial, fragmented hagiography of her husband, and most noticeably she used the device of appropriated screen memories to present *his* life as a version of *her* own. Given the recent research on false memory syndrome, cognitive brain function, and autobiographical theory, it is instructive to use two of Mary Shelley's most autobiographical fictions as case studies of how memory, guilt, desire, and the appropriation of self-protective screens can become intertwined.

Contemporary autobiographical theory (post-1970)¹ has been forced to interrogate what Philippe Lejeune has called the "autobiographical pact," or the delicate *entente* between writer and reader that allows readers to believe that the autobiographies they are reading are "true" (44). In this model of understanding autobiography, the author presents the text as a historically accurate version of an individual's life, using all of the

rhetorical devices available to encourage the reader's trust in the veracity of the events and accounts presented. Another autobiographical theorist influenced by both structuralism of the 1970s and earlier new criticism, Elizabeth Bruss, asserts that there are fixed "rules" that must "be satisfied by the text and the surrounding context of any work which is to 'count as' autobiography" (165). For Bruss these rules concern questions of referentiality, external contextual issues that validate personal claims to truth (10), as well as forms of speech act or linguistic markers, "certain clues embedded in the language of the text" (19). For earlier theorists like Lejeune and Bruss, the questions that autobiography raised were (1) why would an author adopt an autobiographical stance in the first place? (2) what were his or her intentions in adopting such a posture? (3) and how did the rhetorical devices employed in such a genre enhance or harm the truth claims that the work was making?

In another influential theoretical approach to the genre, James Olney has stressed the fluid nature of the autobiographical self; for him, autobiography is "a monument of the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition" (35). For Olney, "there is no way to bring autobiography to heel as a literary genre with its own proper form, terminology, and observances" (qtd. in Brée 172). In much the same vein, Paul John Eakin has noted that "autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, [while] the self that is the center of autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (3). For Eakin, all attempts to reconstruct a personal history "express the play of the autobiographical act itself in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness" (5). Those materials from the past are reconstructed through both narrative conventions as well as what Eakin calls "fundamental structures of consciousness," a "special, heightened form of that reflexive consciousness which is the distinctive feature of our human nature" (9).

But as Sidonie Smith has noted, autobiographical theory traditionally has been predicated on a gender-blind economy, a massive androcentric bias that assumes patriarchal and masculinist narratives as normative. Instead, one of Smith's approaches to the genre argues that women's autobiographies reveal a "doubled subjectivity—the autobiographer as protagonist of her story and the autobiographer as narrator" (17), certainly a method that describes Mary Shelley's fictionalized presentations of her life story. In another theoretical move, Smith argues for the importance of reading the female-authored autobiography for its moments of desire: in the act of writing her tale "the autobiographer confronts personally her culture's stories of male and female desire, insinuating the lines of her story through the lines of the patriarchal story that has been autobiography" (19). And the "patriarchal story" that emerges in Shelley's fiction is, as we know, the well-known narrative of her family romance, first with her father and then with her husband. Women's autobiographies, apart from an emphasis on the personal, private, and quotidian, also typically employ a fluid, circular, concentric structural pattern and a rhetoric of seduction (Brée 172), and certainly we can see in the repetitive arc of Shelley's fictions the need to retell the tale of both seducing and being seduced.

More recently, Leigh Gilmore has argued that autobiography has very distinct "limits" when it comes to revealing the trauma narrative: "[T]rauma is beyond

language in some crucial way. ... Yet at the same time language about trauma is theorized as an impossibility, language is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma. ... Autobiography's paradox is foregrounded so explicitly that the self-representation of trauma confronts itself as a theoretical impossibility" (6, 8). What Gilmore calls the "languages of trauma" (7) include both public and private discourses: the legal testimony suitable to a courtroom trial (public witness to the trauma) as well as recourse to flashbacks, nightmares, and emotional flooding in the text (private and largely unconscious representations of the unresolved residue of the trauma). Clearly, in Mary Shelley's case it is no coincidence that dreams and emotional outbursts recur at moments of desire in the texts, while "The Mourner" is told in the style of a post-mortem flashback.

Mary Shelley's fictions have stood as a test case for contemporary feminist critics who have struggled with one primary dilemma: reading the fiction as art or viewing it as veiled autobiography, and therefore, supposedly, of a lesser artistic value. As Paul de Man notes in "Autobiography as De-Facement," autobiography does not and cannot "reveal reliable self-knowledge; [instead] it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions" (922). For de Man, the notion of a coherent and individual subjectivity that can be successfully related to a reader is itself a fiction, a construction resting on false assumptions about authorial transparency and ontological totalization.

More recently, Graham Allen has advocated the need to go beyond "biographism" in order to explain Mary's particular use of autobiography and intertextuality: "*Mathilda* elides the traditional distinctions between autobiography and biography itself, [while] biographical approaches to her work are haunted by the traces of a patriarchal logic which collapses women's writing into the 'person' presumed to stand uncomplicatedly behind that writing" (170). There is no question that there are autobiographical elements in virtually everything Mary Shelley wrote,² but I would like to complicate exactly how we understand those autobiographical elements by introducing Freud's notion of the screen memory, and then proposing my own revision of his concept—the appropriation of the memories of an idealized other by the self in an attempt to depict a new, "composite" autobiographical self.

A Freudian understanding of memory as a screen-discourse is crucial in analyzing Mary's odd fictional portrayals of herself and her husband or, more accurately, of her husband as an idealized version of herself. Freud has described the *mnemonic* trace as the product of two opposing forces: the conflict between the need to provide a record of a past experience and the psyche's resistance to record that memory. What Freud calls a "screen memory" is not a record of what actually happened in the past, but instead can be more accurately described as a history of the event's remembrance and re-remembrance. We repeat and erase an experience in our minds, or we write it and then rewrite it, or we continuously remember and forget the same experience in our minds, so that we ourselves are not sure what happened or what we think, remember, or imagine might have happened. As Freud has noted, screen memories might be actual memories or imagined fantasies constructed later in life to explain ambivalence, rejection, or the

frustration of some childhood desire: “A ‘screen memory’ [is] one which owes its value as a memory not to its own content but to the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed” (126).

Relying on Freud’s understanding of the screen memory, William Maxwell observes, “what we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of story-telling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling” (27). The nature of memory, and, more specifically what Frances Ferguson has called “romantic memory,” relies on just such shifting notions of the interplay between individual actions, agency, consequences, and morality. As Ferguson notes, “[W]hat is at issue [in romantic memory] is not the possibility that other people will judge differently from the way in which one judges oneself. It is, rather, that the impact of one’s actions on other people comes to cause one to reevaluate what one’s actions were” (523). All of this reminds us that in a fiction by Mary Shelley there is a good deal of repression; we are often not quite sure what the narrative voice thinks about the characters’ actions or even why her characters have done what they claim to have done.

More specifically, I would propose that what has been repressed in Mary Shelley’s fiction is her deeply troubling attraction to and dependence on a variety of male figures who consistently failed her. The male romantic poets (whose work Shelley knew well) had quite publicly denounced the power of the father in his capacity to oppress and tyrannize. In order to supplant the father, to displace and deny him, the male romantics transformed him most frequently into a sibling-hero figure who mirrors as closely as possible the composite idealization of the brother/lover (think Blake’s Orc, Percy Shelley’s Prometheus, or Byron’s Manfred). Mary Shelley on the contrary was not compelled to destroy either father or lover, as both had performed those disillusioning tasks themselves in the course of her life with them. But the literary and personal pursuit of her adult life became the need to find a screen to block the view of both men as failures, and thereby to restore the memory of infantile love for the idealized father and his substitute, the husband. As Freud has noted, screen memories function by positioning a substitute memory in the place of the original memory. Such a move allowed Mary Shelley to distance and repress her ambivalence toward her father until adulthood, when the facade of her screen memories began to crumble, and she began furiously idealizing the father’s substitute, Percy.

But, in the recuperative psychic acts of projection and introjection, Mary consistently portrayed Percy’s memories of childhood abuse and victimization rather than her own, and she did so in a manner that bespeaks the appropriation of his life’s story as if it had actually been her own. This strong need to reconstruct Percy, his youth, and his early marriage and rejection of Harriet all reveal Mary’s attempts to merge their two lives into a redeemed self, a new autobiographical self that actually is a living out of Percy’s cry in *Epipsychidion*:

We shall become the same, we shall be one
Spirit within two frames, oh! Wherefore two?
One passion in twin-hearts, which grows and grew,

Till like two meteors of expanding flame,
 Those spheres instinct with it become the same,
 Touch, mingle, are transfigured; ever still
 Burning, yet ever unconsumable. (lines 573–80)

Percy wrote these lines with another woman, Emilia Viviani, in mind, but Emilia did not live to write fiction about her erstwhile suitor. Mary did. In reconstructing the life and memories of Percy Shelley, Mary seizes the idealized poetic construction and makes of him a male Shelleyan epipsyche, a split-off masculine component of her traumatized mind.³

II. *Mathilda*

I mean, if I find myself way off into an improbable tale, imagining it or telling it, then I can guess that something horrible has happened to me and that I can't bear to think about it. Wait a minute, I said, considering for the first time, do you think this is how storytelling came into being? That the story is only a mask for the truth?

—Alice Walker

Written two years after *Frankenstein* and not published until 1959, *Mathilda* is one of those lost fictions that surfaces more than a century later and suggests new possibilities and openings for understanding a writer's career. A novella about a father's incestuous love for his daughter, his suicide, and the daughter's decline into melancholia and a suicidal early death, *Mathilda* was written out of intense ambivalence toward both Godwin and Percy by a young woman who had seen both her father and her husband disappoint her, and three of her own young children die by the time she was 22. Like her mother's thinly veiled autobiographies, *Mary* and *Maria*, *Mathilda* has been interpreted as Mary Shelley's own fantasy rewrite of her life: the dead but perfect mother; the absent but all-loving father willing to kill himself rather than hurt his beloved daughter; the bright but grieving daughter pursued by the handsome, rich, and famous young poet. Mathilda wills her own early death, but before that event occurs in the final pages of the novella, she depicts for her idealized audience of one (the poet Woodville) her life and the history of her emotions. The young heroine has had very little external life, very few events outside the claustrophobic confines of the idyllic bourgeois family. The only adventure of Mathilda's life is the discovery and brief recovery of her father, and that reunion, unfortunately, kills them both.

Mathilda can be read on several levels as a working out of Mary Shelley's own family romance turned nightmare. The worm at the core of Mary Shelley's version, however, consists of her own displaced and elided incestuous desires, concealed from her consciousness by the use of the characters in *Mathilda* who function as embodied screen-memories, fictively blocking her from viewing her own parents as objects of desire. Her favorite childhood sport is to "form affections and intimacies with the aerial creations of my own brain" and to "cling to the memory of my parents; my mother I should never see, she was dead: but the idea of my unhappy, wandering father was the idol of my imagination" (159). Gazing longingly at the miniature of her father, Mathilda amuses herself with the fantasy that "disguised like a boy I would seek my

father through the world. My imagination hung upon the scene of recognition; his miniature, which I should continually wear exposed on my breast, would be the means and I imagined the moment to my mind a thousand and a thousand times" (159).

Mathilda imagines herself searching for her father disguised as a boy, and we could say that such is the case because boys during this period were more likely to travel with their fathers than girls were. But we could also recognize here the desire of a girl to change her sex so that she will be more acceptable to the father. When Mathilda imagines her reunion with her father, it occurs sometimes in a desert, sometimes in a populous city, sometimes at a ball, sometimes on a boat—and the boat will resurface again in "The Mourner." He always speaks first and always his words are exactly the same: "My daughter, I love thee!" (159). The location—sometimes empty, sometimes crowded—suggests that the core of the incestuous fantasy for the child concerns numbers; that is, when she imagines the reunion, she refigures it as a denial of the reality of encroaching others in what is for her essentially an idealized and exclusive dyadic relationship. For Mathilda, any competition for the father is fearful and needs to be eliminated. The father reappears only when Mathilda is sixteen and at the height of her youthful beauty, and, with her mother safely dead and no siblings as rivals, Mathilda has no competition. When her father magically appears in a forest to claim her, she is clad in a symbolically virginal white frock. *Mathilda* reads at this and other points as an embarrassingly personal seduction fantasy. We have here Mary Shelley's attempt to rewrite her life as if her father had not remarried and had a favorite son named William.⁴

Mathilda puts her education to good use, however, and immediately begins resorting to literary displacements in order to explain how she feels about her father. These analogies are not particularly promising, for very quickly Mathilda compares herself to Oedipus, Psyche, and the Biblical David. The transformation in associations and mythic archetypes suggests that Mathilda sees herself alternately as male or female, sometimes victimizer and sometimes victim of forces beyond her control. All of these mythic characters, however, have two traits in common: they were all wounded and traumatized repeatedly, and yet all used their special talents to do battle against a potent and threatening familial figure or figures. All of these literary allusions also recall what Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* called the compulsion to repeat due to the fact that the patient can never remember "the whole of what is repressed in him [sic]," so "[h]e is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past" (602; his emphases).

We can recall further that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud asked where the psychic core of trauma was located? He posed the question by asking if trauma should be understood as the direct and immediate brush with death or as the experience of surviving that near-fatal disaster and yet being forced to relive it repeatedly in dreams and painful memories:

What psycho-analysis reveals in the transference phenomena of neurotics can also be observed in the lives of some normal people. The impression they give is of being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some 'daemonic' power; but psycho-analysis has

always taken the view that their fate is for the most part arranged by themselves and determined by early infantile influences. (604)

In a similar vein, Cathy Caruth has noted that “in the oscillation between the crisis of death and the crisis of life” we get “a kind of double-telling,” a narrative that exists “between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). In Mathilda’s case she conceals the initial wound—the mother’s death and her own guilty survival—only to have that original lack, the primordial trauma, reactivated when her father loves and then deserts her.

Styling herself as a heroine of melodrama, Mathilda cannot see herself except through the lenses of literary conventions or what we would recognize as fantasy formations. Sometimes she is a Greek mythological figure, sometimes a Biblical hero, sometimes a Renaissance ideal, but finally she is never simply a young woman who lost her mother and was abandoned in childhood by her father. In fact, one is tempted to say that she has not developed a sense of self, a sense of separation from others that would allow her to approach her father as an equal. She can only be his inferior and his part-object, a cathectic reminder of his earlier passion for his dead wife. She exists, in other words, as the living embodiment of *his* wound, his loss of his wife. Because we read the text completely from Mathilda’s point of view it is easy to overlook the fact that the father is as wounded, if not more so, than his daughter. The narrative relates a doubled trauma, as if father and daughter were confronting each other in a dream and simultaneously asking, “Father/Daughter, don’t you see that I am burning?” (Freud, “Beyond” 594). When Mathilda finally forces the “truth” out of her father, she is not simply confronting the horror of incest, she is also realizing the fact that she has never been ontologically “real” or separate to him. He sees her as the living embodiment of an earlier and more fulfilling relationship. He does not see her, but then he never did. He has simply been too wounded, too caught in his own saga of loss to see her as anything other than the living residue of his dead wife.

So what exactly is the unspeakable fact within the text? The novella is structured so that readers think that incestuous and perverse love of father for daughter is the hidden core of the work, but I would suggest instead that hate is the actual subject of this novella. When Mathilda tries to uncover her father’s secret, she asks him, “Am I the cause of your grief?” (171), and he blurts out, “Yes, you are the sole, the agonizing cause of all I suffer, of all I must suffer until I die. Now, beware! Be silent! Do not urge me to your destruction ... beware!” (172). The syntax here is revealing, for it suggests a blaming of the victim. Mathilda causes her own destruction, the father suggests, by being the object of his desire. When confronted with the truth of his ambivalence, the father initially concedes: “Yes, yes, I hate you! You are my bane, my poison, my disgust!” But this lie is immediately retracted when he blurts out, “Oh! No! ... you are none of all these; you are my light, my only one, my life.—My daughter, I love you!” (173). The text has moved inexorably to this moment of climax, this confession of unnatural and incestuous passion. But the confession of love follows within a few breaths from an outburst of hatred. Mathilda’s immediate response is to sink to the ground, “covering my face and almost dead with excess of sickness and fear: a cold perspiration covered my forehead and I shivered in every limb” (173). The nausea that

attacks her here is repeated at the end of the text as she waits to die from a self-induced fever. The illness from which she truly suffers and has suffered throughout the novella, however, is hatred toward her father and guilt for that hatred. His early desertion and long absence are never forgiven. His eccentricity, his jealousy of the vague suitor, his “strangeness”—all of these are repeated or elided so consistently that we can only conclude that Mathilda hates her father and longs to escape with an idealized and phantom figure, some sort of composite of the idealized poet Woodville and the memory of the dead mother.

But while protesting to love her father still with a pure heart, Mathilda hears her father’s footsteps approach her bedroom, pause at her door, and then, after a few moments, retreat. This well-known leitmotif, the heroine besieged in her own bedroom on a dark and stormy night by a potential rapist, precipitates the most anxious emotions in Mathilda:

That he should be restless I understood; that he should wander as an unladen ghost and find no quiet from the burning hell that consumed his heart. But why approach my chamber? Was not that sacred? I felt almost ready to faint while he had stood there, but I had not betrayed my wakefulness by the slightest motion, although I had heard my own heart beat with violent fear. (175)

This nocturnal visit causes Mathilda to have a particularly unpleasant dream about her father. Like most textual dreams, this one is an overdetermined warning and foreshadowing of what lies in the future for the heroine. In her ominously foreshadowing dream Mathilda finds her father “deadly pale, and clothed in flowing garments of white. Suddenly he started up and fled from me” (176). The chase ensues, with Mathilda vaguely aware that her father means to kill himself unless she can rescue him first. Just as she reaches him and catches a part of his robe, he leaps off a cliff to his death. Recall that Mathilda first met her father in a wood clothed in a flowing white garment, and notice now that the power-dynamic between them has shifted. Now it is the father who is dressed in white, less a virgin than a sacrificial victim. Now it is in the daughter’s power to give life and happiness. The apprehension and resentment that the child feels at her powerlessness to win and keep the father’s affections has turned into the opposite emotion. Now it is the child who can doom the father with her rejection of him. There is guilt and sorrow in the dream, but ultimately there is also anger and revenge: a wish-fulfillment that appears to say, “Daddy, don’t you see that you are dying.” The wages of the father’s earlier desertion of the child are death now by that child’s very hands. And so the need to write arises out of the gap between the experience of a trauma and our ability to work through and out of it. In the act of writing a literary text we transform the trauma, but we never process it to the point that the trauma can or ever will disappear. The residue of trauma as the origin of a literary work persists in repeated imagery patterns that we begin to recognize as the residue of excessive, obsessive, delusional, hyperbolic, indeed, hysterical emotions.

As incest is not the most acceptable of desires or practices, Mathilda must shield herself from recognizing this desire in either herself or her father; she must, in short, find a screen to block the unpleasant view, the realization of her own frustrated desire

for the father. As Freud has noted, screen memories function by positioning a substitute memory (for instance, the banished suitor) in the place of the original memory (love for her father). Such a move allows Mathilda to distance and successfully repress her incestuous desires until the crisis of her father's confession, when the facade of this screen memory begins to crumble and, in response, she reacts in desperation, in full-blown anger, even frenzy.

The dream stands clearly as a wish-fulfillment, a not very subtle castration fantasy, and the very next day this very dream will be enacted with the expected fatal consequences. When Mathilda awakes the next morning she learns that her father has fled the estate, leaving behind a maudlin and self-justifying letter. After writing his letter, the father promptly leaves and dutifully walks off the very cliff Mathilda had foreseen in her dream. His death-march to the sea is punctuated by a lightning flash that rends an oak, a bell that sounds like a death knell, all of the very gothic props that had occurred in Mathilda's dream of the night before. Following her father, just too late to save him, she finally locates his dead body in a cottage near the sea: "... the bed within instantly caught my eyes, something stiff and straight lay on it, covered by a sheet; the cottagers looked aghast" (184). The father has become the very object that he spent his life fleeing: publicly exposed on a bed, stiff, straight, the subject of shock and disgust for innocent onlookers. In short, the father has become a phallic spectacle. Mathilda can only collapse on the side of the bed, having escaped the fate of her mother. We can recall here Jean Baudrillard's observation:

Perhaps death is always incestuous—a fact that would only add to its spell. ... The great stories of seduction, that of Phaedra or Isolde, are stories of incest, and always end in death. What are we to conclude, if not that death itself awaits us in the age-old temptation of incest, including in the incestuous relation we maintain with our own image? (69)

Mathilda's fate will mirror her father's very shortly, as she will seek her own suicide rather than live with the guilty knowledge that she caused her father's death. Her aborted romance with the poet Woodville (a slightly veiled portrait of Percy) cannot be consummated, and Mathilda will choose thanatos over eros, a victim of the pull of claustrophobic, patriarchal love.

III. "The Mourner"

And in Melodious Accents I
Will sit me down & Cry, I, I.
—William Blake

Mary Shelley chose to write a shorter version of the *Mathilda* narrative when she penned "The Mourner" in 1829, exactly ten years later. Forced by Trelawny's request to recall her early years with Percy, the traumatic autumn of 1816 when both Fanny Imlay and then Harriet Shelley committed suicide, the deaths of her children, and her father's continuous financial frustrations, about which she could do nothing, Mary writes one more time a fictionalized version of herself, Percy, and her father as victims of forces beyond their control. Like *Mathilda*, "The Mourner" is presented as an extended suicide note to a substitute suitor, substitute, that is, for the father. But "The

Mourner's" heroine is now a split woman, going by the names of Clarice Eversham or Ellen Burnet, the former her pre-parricide identity and the latter her post-parricide self. The suitor-figure is also split between Lewis Elmore and Horace Neville, who is a later manifestation of the Woodville character from *Mathilda*.

But the most uncanny and revealing moment in the text occurs when Neville relates to Ellen his childhood memories: "I was sent to Eton at eleven years of age. I will not dwell upon my sufferings there ... I was a fag to a hard taskmaster ... Speak of West Indian slavery! My tender years of aristocratic childhood were yielded up to a capricious, unrelenting, cruel bondage, far beyond the measured despotism of Jamaica" (86). After this bit of hyperbole, Neville goes on to relate the final indignity, occurring when he was 13: "[M]y tyrant, I will give him no other name, issued a command, in the wantonness of power, for me to destroy a poor little bullfinch I had tamed and caged. I refused, he seized my pet, wrung its neck, threw it at my feet, and, with a laugh of derision, quitted the room" (86). I would claim that when Neville relates this childhood trauma to Clarice he actually recalls before her eyes the memory of the death of her father; that is, hearing his tale reactivates her own earlier traumatic and guilty loss of her father.

This traumatic incident, so extended and detailed and concerned not with the heroine's childhood, about which we learn very little, but about Neville's, can be identified as an appropriated screen memory. It is, of course, a virtual restatement of Percy's time at Eton College, which he attended from the ages of 12 to 18. Refusing to valet for his fagmaster Matthews, Shelley was taunted, bullied, tortured by all accounts, and he no doubt suffered for the rest of his life from his treatment there (Holmes 19). But the real-life Percy could give as good as he got. In 1825 Mary recalled: "I have often heard our Shelley relate the story of stabbing an upper boy with a fork. He always described it, in my hearing, as an almost involuntary act, done on the spur of anguish, and that he made the stab as the boy was going out of the room" (qtd. in Holmes 20). The attempt to present Percy as the innocent, traumatized victim of oppression—rather than the fork-wielding aggressor that he frequently was—is a crucial component of Mary's hagiography of Percy, but it is also central to her own attempt to present herself as the innocent victim, not the sultry seducer who stole a married man away from his pregnant, teenage bride by reclining on her mother's grave.

The use of Percy's memories here as appropriated screen-memories for the authorial consciousness recall not simply Freud's approach to the subject, but also that of Ian Hacking, a philosopher who has written about false-memory syndrome. Mary's use of Percy's childhood abuse is similar to what Hacking has called "memoro-politics, a politics of the secret, of the forgotten event that can be turned, if only by strange flashbacks, into something monumental" (214). For Hacking, the notion of trauma took on new meaning with Jean-Martin Charcot's diagnostic work on hysteria during the late 1870s in France, when for the first time trauma began to refer to spiritual, psychic, or mental injuries. It was only when memory came to be considered the core of individual consciousness that trauma could be viewed as a "wound to the soul" (4). But if memory was now established as the repository of an individual and unique identity, it was also the locus of trauma, the place where individuals were wounded and damaged. Mary

Shelley's story attempts to address this bifurcation in creating a split-heroine, the earlier, strong and beautiful Clarice, the later unhappy and isolated Ellen. The oscillation between these two women is an instructive early study in how hysteria rewrites trauma on the female psyche.

"The Mourner" was written ten years after Percy's death, while *Mathilda* was written while Percy still lived. Such a simple observation of historical fact is necessary in order to explain the psychic work that each fiction attempts to accomplish. In the earlier work, the father is the object of intense ambivalence, both loved and hated by the autobiographical consciousness ("Mathilda") forming the tale. In the latter work, the psychic energy is invested in the suitor-figure, split as he is between two men. "The Mourner" depicts a highly filtered, constructed heroine in that she does not tell the tale of her life herself, rather it is told by Neville to Elmore, who was once the heroine's fiancé. Elmore himself functions later in the tale as a narrator, filling in Clarice's earlier life as the adored daughter of Lord Eversham, and surely his name hints at the father's feet of clay ("always a fraud").

After escaping his abusive school environment, Neville throws himself at the feet of Ellen, who now functions as his instructress:

I visited my disguised nymph. I no longer associated with my schoolfellows; their diversions, their pursuits, appeared vulgar and stupid to me. ... [Ellen's] profound, her intense melancholy, sister to despair—her serious, sad discourse—her mind, estranged from all worldly concerns, forbade that; but there was an enchantment in her sorrow, as fascination in her converse, that lifted me above common existence; she created a magic circle, which I entered as holy ground. (88)

In addition to rewriting the psychic dynamics of Percy's *Epipsychidion*, Mary also seems here to be reconstructing the situation in Percy's *Alastor*, this time positioning a young male at the feet of a melancholy, damaged woman, not some phantom of his adolescent imagination. But the bucolic interlude in the woods comes to an unpleasant pass when Ellen invites Neville to drink poison with her, just as Mathilda offered the same beverage to Woodville. In this version of the aborted suicide pact, Ellen "prepared the mortal beverage; it was on the table before her when I entered; she did not deny its nature, she did not attempt to justify herself; she only besought me not to hate her and to sooth by my kindness her last moments.—'I cannot live!' was all her explanation, all her excuse" (89). And just as Woodville refused to drink the poison with Mathilda, stating, "'I have a mother whose support and hope I am'" (203), so does Neville say almost exactly the same thing: "'I cannot die, for I have a mother—a father'" (90). Clearly, the memory of being motherless, and the desire to die to join the dead mother—or to force the father to join the dead mother—was a script that the narrative voice continued to reconstruct.

The dramatic action of "The Mourner" culminates on a burning ship when Clarice refuses to leave her father on the deck and join the other women and children in partially filled lifeboats. Although she is warned by the ship's captain that she will ultimately cost her father his life, she stubbornly remains with him until, of course, there is only one seat left on the final boat. In order to force his daughter onto that last boat, Lord Eversham leaps into the ocean and Clarice sees her father drown

before her eyes. She also sees the ship's captain and last passengers curse her as a "parricide," and it is this curse that she is never able to overcome. Like Mathilda's assumption of nun-like garb and an isolated existence after her father's suicide, Clarice now recasts her identity as "Ellen Burnet," and she goes into hiding in the Windsor countryside where she is discovered and befriended by Neville, the Shelleyan avatar. Only when he sees her miniature in the possession of his friend Elmore does he hear her history and understand her identity as a recluse, unable to forgive herself for her father's death. Thinking that he can provide a happy ending for the morose Ellen and the unhappy Elmore, Neville rushes to Ellen's cottage just too late to reunite her with her lost love. Neville arrives to find that Ellen has killed herself with the poison that she earlier tried to offer to him. She has left behind a suicide note, explaining her actions:

Describe your poor Ellen to him, and he will speedily see that *she* died on the waves of the murderous Atlantic. Ellen had nothing in common with *her*, save love for, and interest in him. Tell him, it had been well for him, perhaps, to have united himself to the child of prosperity, the nursling of deep love; but it had been destruction, even could he have meditated such an act, to wed the parricide—. I will not write that word. (98)

Both tales, then, hinge on issues of parricide, frustrated suitors, dead mothers, and guilty and yet blameless heroines. What we might recognize as the narrative of the psychically dominant Mary Shelley emerges in both these tales, as well as a number of her other works, and I would claim that this narrative is a saga filled with a fair amount of anger, paranoia, guilt, self-justifications, and finally escapism. It is not a story that inspires confidence in its narrative voice, but it is a tale that reveals how the mind will seek to find various means over the period of several years to redress old wounds. The talking-cure that is the fiction finally does not provide the salvation that the authorial consciousness desires. Shelley concludes this version of the *Mathilda* narrative no closer to "closure" on her relationship with Percy and Godwin than she had been ten years previously.

IV. Appropriated Screen Memories as Defenses

To seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion. It is to be taken in by one's own illusion and to move in an enchanted world.

—Jean Baudrillard

As we have seen, a screen-memory functions as a blocking agent, protecting the psyche from confronting a more painful memory that would damage or hurt the self.⁵ In an affirmative nod to Freud, the contemporary psychologist Arnold Ludwig has recently observed that

throughout psychotherapy, the patient deals with the conflict between what is true but hard to describe—that is, the pure memory—and what is describable but partly untrue—that is, the screen-memory. The very attempt to translate the original memory destroys it because the words, as they are chosen, likely misrepresent the image, and because the translation, no matter how good, replaces the original. (156)

In *Mathilda*, Mary constructs the memory of a banished and rejected suitor and in doing so she revises her own traumatic courtship of Percy as well as by Percy. In this version of her ur-narrative, the heroine is oblivious to the suitor, and it is the father who reacts with hysteria and eventually a confession of his unnatural, incestuous desires. The key to understanding Shelley's use of screen memories can be located in the need to uncover the wound that each text explores, partially seen but also partially screened from view. In *Mathilda* it is the issue of courtship by an interloper, but is the interloper suitor meant as a screen for Percy or Mary? I would contend that both texts present a split suitor because in some way the two faces of the courtship are both Mary and Percy. In other words, just as Percy wooed Mary away from her father, so did Mary woo Percy away from Harriet. The screen being erected here also protects Mary from viewing herself; it blocks out her identity as husband-stealing adulteress.

In "The Mourner" the wound being screened from view is the nature and identity of Neville, who is presented not as an aggressor but as the innocent victim of unjust persecution. The crux of Mary's autobiographical dilemma is that she needs to recreate Percy, Godwin, and herself in order to reinvent and sanitize her own personal history. If, as de Man observes, all autobiography is ultimately fictional because of its need to resort to topological constructions, then Mary's use of split characters and appropriated screen memories paradoxically serves her agenda. In *Mathilda* the father becomes a ravaging monster and the suitor an innocent, passive pawn, not an active or adulterous seducer. In "The Mourner" roughly the same strategy is followed, and Percy is presented as a misunderstood victim, while the heroine is not a parricide by choice, but only because of an accident caused by her intense love and irrational devotion to her father. In other words, in both texts the father-figure is blamed while the heroine and her split-suitor are absolved of any wrongdoing.

And what is one to make of the repeated trope of suicide in both texts? In *Mathilda* the heroine seeks her suicidal death in a rain shower and wet grass, while in "The Mourner" a drowning kills the father with his daughter a helpless witness to his demise. Percy Shelley's death by water is certainly recalled in the latter work, but so are Harriet Shelley's 1816 suicide in the Serpentine and even Mary Wollstonecraft's own failed suicide attempt. Fanny Imlay, Mary's half-sister, killed herself two months before Harriet Shelley did by drinking laudanum in a dingy hotel room, a scene almost directly out of both texts. It is unusual to say the least that Mary would continue to revisit the scenes of the crime so to speak. It would be more likely that she would instead attempt to screen herself from the memory of water and suicide by laudanum with all their traumatic associations. But, in fact, she consistently places her characters in watery or poisonous graves. The heroine of *Valperga* (1823), Euthanasia, dies by drowning and in *The Last Man* (1826), the heroine Perdita attaches herself as so much wet baggage to a cargo ship being sent to her estranged husband Lord Raymond, suicide note attached. And we can also recall the watery deaths that William Godwin gave Mary Macneil's family in *Fleetwood* (1805).

Mary herself put forward the theory that there was an uncanny resemblance between the death by drowning scene in *Valperga*, written shortly before her husband's death, to the death of Percy at sea, when she wrote to her friend Maria Gisborne, "But it seems

to me that in what I have hitherto written I have done nothing but prophecy what has arrived to. Mathilda foretells even many small circumstances most truly & whole of it is a monument of what now is" (*Letters* 336). Critics have seized on this statement and used it to argue that there is no point in using the fiction to understand the life of Mary Shelley. As Gillingham states, Shelley's letter should serve "as a reminder of the inadequacy and instability of the figures by which we understand both the life and its renderings" (261). But such a reading of Shelley's letter merely privileges her attempt at screening from view the actual "figures" that had motivated the death scenes. Mary wanted to place before the public eye the figure of the dead poet Shelley, a death for which she could not be held responsible in any way. What Mary most specifically needed to have blocked from view were the dead bodies of Harriet and Fanny, the actual women whose fates were inextricably bound up in the Shelley saga she was reenacting in her fictions. By fictively subjecting versions of herself to a watery or poisoned fate, Mary actually screens from view her own guilt for Harriet's suicide, as well as Fanny's. In being the legitimate daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley earned her status as Godwin's "real" daughter and Percy's "real" wife and soul mate. The fictional evidence suggests that in some way Mary plagued herself with thoughts of guilt that she had purchased both of these roles at the expense of other women, and it is the memories of these women—as well as the father and husband—that she screens from view in both of her fictional autobiographies.

Fantasies, appropriation, memory, guilt, and desire—such is the raw material of all writing, and autobiographies certainly have been no exception. When trauma enters the linguistic domain, however, the narrative consciousness frequently splits into what Janice Haaken calls a "dual consciousness": the "disassociated memories are preserved in an alter ego state, or latent state of consciousness, through an amnesic barrier protecting one part of the personality from knowledge of the abuse" (354). In this model, all memories are always screen-memories, partially hidden from view because to confront the past fully and truthfully can only be a source of overwhelming pain. Mary Shelley chose to confront her past fantasies as well as memories through a glass darkly, through what I would label the conflicted and ambiguous genre of fictionalized autobiography.

Notes

- [1] The history of autobiographical theory is obviously a large and complex field that cannot be summarized easily within the introductory confines of this article. Suffice it to say that Olney credits Gusdorf's 1956 article as originating contemporary discussions of the genre, while Spengemann makes a rival claim for Hart's 1970 article. Smith provides the best overview of the history of the field, as well as the most helpful discussion of the recent gendered approaches to the genre (3–19).
- [2] Shelley's *Mathilda* is enjoying a fair amount of critical attention, although "The Mourner" has received much less attention. For analyses of the autobiographical basis of *Mathilda*, see Hoeveler; Allen; Himes; Gillingham; Garrett; Bernardo; and Clemit. For "The Mourner," see McKeever.
- [3] I have discussed the psychodynamics of narcissism, solipsism, and introjection in my *Romantic Androgyny: The Women Within* (1990). What I and other critics have called the colonization or

the “cannibalization of the feminine” with regard to the male canonical Romantic poets can also be seen to some extent in Mary Shelley’s appropriation of Percy’s memories.

- [4] Rajan’s insightful study of melancholy in *Mathilda* makes the very useful observation, “But if *Mathilda* is not fiction, it is also not autobiography, since its deliberate disfiguration of Mary Shelley’s relationship with Godwin achieves its effect by occupying an uncertain space between the literal and the figural” (48). On the specific use of the incestuous content of *Mathilda*, see also Chatterjee; McKeever; Edelman-Young; Harpold; and Kelly.
- [5] Contemporary psychologists have extensively studied the role of narrative and memory in the formation of identity, the leading theorist of “life story” narratives being Dan McAdams. Cognitive studies of memory as well as the dynamics of the so-called false memory syndrome are suggested throughout this article, but the masses of research materials on these topics, as well as narrative psychology as a discipline, are simply larger and more complex than the confines of this essay will allow. Briefly, the contemporary psychologist Gazzaniga’s work has attempted to locate the memory function in something he calls the “interpreter” in the brain:

The left hemisphere is built to interpret data the brain has already processed. Yes, there is a special device in the left brain [within the hippocampus], which I call the *interpreter*, that carries out one more activity upon completion of zillions of automatic brain processes. The interpreter, the last device in the information chain in our brain, reconstructs the brain events and in doing so makes telling errors of perception, memory, and judgment. The clue to how we are built is buried not just in our marvelously robust capacity for these functions, but also in the errors that are frequently made during reconstruction. Biography is fiction. Autobiography is hopelessly inventive. (2)

False memory syndrome, or the false belief that one was abused as a child, has become the latest focus of attention in memory studies. An extremely contentious and controversial topic, false memory syndrome is not recognized by the American Psychiatric Association, nor is it listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1994). Briefly, Loftus has claimed that memories can never be retrieved in any intact or reliable form, while Terr has taken the opposite position.

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