

## Strange Intimacies: Vulnerability and Liberation

Theodore Roszak's *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* (1995), and *Bride of Frankenstein* (Again)

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### Intimacy Inhibited

Feminist readings and rewritings of *Frankenstein* can be limited in their critical impact by a disregard for the idea that there might be such a thing as a general unfinishedness to all existents, a necessity for their continuing instauration, and a concomitant relatability to be valued in this. This can make for an unfortunate connection between feminist critique and a language of 'identities' such as Victor Frankenstein in Rose's film employs it. In much feminist criticism, the bodies in and around *Frankenstein* acquire relevance mostly in their role of being *subjected to* politics, shaped by and thus victim to power and hence indicators of a domination to be overcome. In this logic, individuals possess a vulnerability that, rather than native to the beings in question, is forced upon them under specific circumstances. Victor's misguided creative attempts, Gilbert and Gubar have famously claimed, mirror Shelley's "anxiety about her own aesthetic activity" (in her "alienated attic workshop of filthy creation she has given birth to a deformed book, a literary abortion or miscarriage" [233]). Simultaneously, Shelley is seen to reduplicate in Victor's creature, which is "himself as nameless as a woman is in patriarchal society, as nameless as unmarried, illegitimately pregnant Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin may have felt herself to be at the time she

wrote *Frankenstein*" (241). Vulnerability here figures as a specifically female problem ("femaleness [being] the gender definition of mothers and daughters, orphans and beggars, monsters and false creators" [232]). In a similar vein, Mary Poovey has argued that *Frankenstein* is born, essentially, from the clash between Romantic aesthetics (self-assertive) and prevalent ideals of femininity (self-effacing) in which Mary Shelley finds herself caught up.

In a more literal interpretation, Ellen Moers' famous early reading of *Frankenstein* as "Female Gothic" sees the story as "birth myth" (140) rooted in the female body and returning to the body in the end (due to its Gothic capacities to affect and scare). "[P]erhaps no literary work of any kind by a woman, better repays examination in the light of the sex of its author," Moers says. "*Frankenstein* seems to be distinctly a woman's mythmaking on the subject of birth because its emphasis is upon [...] the trauma of the afterbirth" (142) and thus expresses a sensitivity to the affective complexities of childbearing that was enabled, not least, by Mary Shelley's unusually chaotic and difficult private circumstances (148). Margaret Homans argues further that Victor Frankenstein's "circumvention of the maternal" expresses a problem with embodiment as such that is, essentially, oedipally conditioned – *Frankenstein*, she argues, effects a "literalization of male literature" (118) which spells out a manifestation of objects of desire as "necessarily imperfect yet independent" beings which can, inside oedipal frameworks, only seem "monstrous and alarming" (115).

What such readings implicitly suggest is that inconsistency or dissonance emerge *only* upon the occasion of the (female) writer's and/or the (female) body's entry into cultural, into symbolic order (in the literal sense of the word: the order of values and equivalences that in particular Rose's Victor relies on, where "you" can always be made again). This characterises the (female and/or natural and/or monstrous) body-subject simultaneously as self-evident and opaque – before and beyond this order, these readings assume, this body-subject 'just is,' unproblematically. Theodore Roszak's 1995 novel *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* presents a rather clumsy version of such critique in novel form, and thus illustrates its problematic implications quite well. The novel reconstructs *Frankenstein* as a story of repressed nature – inevitably gendered

female – which breaks free (if only for a while) in a telepathic merge of Elizabeth Lavenza and the creature, both marked as the animal opposition to Victor's technocratic dominion. The novel presents the journals of Elizabeth as edited by Robert Walton, which recount her childhood and youth in the Frankenstein household, where she and Victor become involved in the Baroness Frankenstein's strongly eroticised alchemical studies and ambitions. Victor's immoderate temperament and ambition have these erotic exercises end in the rape of his foster sister and fiancée. This occurrence causes him to retreat to Ingolstadt and embark on his fatal project of reanimation; and Elizabeth, in turn, to flee into the mountains to “become a feral woman” (284). The creature befriends his creator's companion and a telepathic bond develops between the two which, however, does not prevent Elizabeth from suffering a violent death at the creature's hands in the end. *Memoirs* clearly aims to be a feminist text and yet it is more in its shortcomings as such a text than in its overt agenda that it illustrates all the problems that identity politics hold not only, but decidedly in the context of feminist thinking.

The novel presents itself as advocate for nature, gender equality, and more communal forms of living, and yet it fails to give an adequate impression of those very things, that is, one that would in any way be vivid or dynamic. Intimate connection is a missed opportunity in and for *Memoirs*. This failure is itself instructive because it indirectly highlights the centrality of relation for narrative fiction, or, to put it differently: *Memoirs* ultimately leaves its readers waiting in vain for the very connection it purportedly works to establish. It reaches for a communal fictional experience – but infelicitously so; and what stands in the way, both in terms of plot and of poetic strategy, is a patriarchal politics of identity. Erin Manning confirms how “individuation has not been adequately thought [...] because a sole form of equilibrium has been foregrounded that has privileged stability over metastability” (90). If we acknowledge dynamic individuation, however, Manning says, identity is exposed “as a moment in a process” (90) and “matter and form” in turn appear as “processual states” (87). The dangers of reifying identity, even if it is in the name of ‘justice,’ are precisely what manifests in and with Roszak's *Memoirs* even more than for instance in Rose's film

because the latter, unlike the novel, doesn't fool itself as to the validity of such identities. In the process, however, Roszak's novel also adumbrates a relational paradigm which is one of intimacy more than of identity, of relation more than recognition. *Memoirs* is unable to flesh out these politics of intimacy and yet it contains traces of them.<sup>1</sup>

## Feral Woman

Again and again, Roszak's novel applies itself to a critique of the oppression of 'female nature' by 'male technology and science.' The novel's heroine is emphatically associated with the natural world, which she takes refuge in after being raped by Victor – or what the novel takes to be the 'natural world' in its stark oppositions of science and domestic environments versus alpine landscape, mystic knowledge, and female pagan rituals. Mixing a rather crude eco-feminism into Elizabeth's personal recollection of trauma, the passages depicting her flight into the wild equate Elizabeth's body with the animal and vegetable world,

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1 Nancy Fraser's rather laconic phrasing seems to have lost none of its actuality: "Ironically, [...] the identity model serves as a vehicle for misrecognition: in reifying group identity, it ends up obscuring the politics of cultural identification" (112). One might, of course, find some of the feminist issues I rehearse here and in the following self-evident. Then again, very little seems self-evident about feminism at a time when Dior is selling T-shirts prompting us all to be feminists at 620 Euros per piece. – Manning, in turn, is making a more general philosophical point by relying on Gilbert Simondon's work. Simondon grasps the problem of individuation by substituting the traditional matter-form-dichotomy and -asymmetry by the concept of the in-formation of a metastable field: originating from a structural core, form is not so much imposed on matter but spreads progressively, one element affecting the next, in a field that, by virtue of not being stabilised and thus possessing a certain tension or energy, is able to manifest, bit by bit, the form 'transduced' (as Simondon calls it) by the core. Effectively, Simondon modifies Platonic and Aristotelian ideas of archetype and hylemorphism into an energetics of form. This is, as Simondon claims, a model for the genesis of living creatures as much as for social structure ("Form, Information, Potentiale").

thus strengthening the impression that the Frankensteinian enterprise is a veritable crime against nature. This crime is attributed to a male-dominated practice of science which deludes itself that it is superior to the world which it studies, thus turning objectivity into objectification. “I have heard that the Cartesian philosophers perform dissections upon live specimens,” Elizabeth contextualises her experiences of violence, equating science and rape, “dismissing their cries of anguish as merely ‘mechanical’ twinge. [...] I have heard they nail cats and dogs to the boards and cut them and beat them to study their response. I know how these poor creatures suffer; I have tasted their humiliation. I have been that beast nailed to the wall” (285).

Her life in the wild is presented as the opposite of scientific objectivity/objectification, as she dissolves into and merges with, or lives in continuation of, her surroundings: “I live more and more like the beasts in the immediacy of my experience, letting necessity determine my schedule. I wake and sleep as fatigue dictates; I lie down wherever I please and eat as appetite decrees [...]. I give no names to things [...]. Adam named the animals in Eden. *Adam*. Not *Eve*.” She has become “the feral woman, the female child of Nature” (286–87). During this time in the wild, her experiences are reported in diary form – in contrast to the tidy and retrospective journal form in which the bulk of the text is presented. This period of Elizabeth’s life radicalises what has earlier in the novel been captured as ritualised female interaction with nature, for instance in Elizabeth’s initiation into the local women’s secret community – which consists in a ritual taking place at night in the woods and involves a group of naked women, drums, chants, a stone altar, two sacred daggers, bodies moving “with the elemental flowing” (108) and, of course, a rising moon.

Roszak’s novel diagnoses in its source material an undercurrent demanding exposure and explication – the “bold, hauntingly erotic retelling of *Frankenstein*,” the “shocking tale that Mary Shelley dared not write,” is what the book’s cover announces – and this undercurrent is made out to be not simply ‘the female side of things’ but likewise a less segregated form of co-existence. Alchemy, in Roszak’s text, is easily readable as symbolising this existential unity – “it is the *oneness* that matters,” alchemical teacher Seraphina explains about her work at some

point (216), which puts her into sharp contrast to the disaffected male observers in the novel who are involved in mainstream science. At one point, the air pump experiment mentioned only in passing in Shelley's novel is depicted at length and turns into a veritable killing spree as more and more animals are put under the glass dome (187–89). Where Victor is fascinated, Elizabeth and Baroness Caroline Frankenstein are horrified. Lady Caroline's and Seraphina's alchemical training of Victor and Elizabeth, in contrast, seems to follow an agenda of sexual liberation as well as liberation from language as representational means of communication, for instance when Victor is made to meditate on Elizabeth's naked body until it seems to Elizabeth that she "know[s] his desire from inside his own thoughts" and Victor reports "I was both you and myself" (198).<sup>2</sup>

Into the stark dichotomy that it sets up – of civilisation, science, technology (male) versus nature and the natural body (female) – the novel, towards its end, inserts Frankenstein's creature itself. The monster turns up at Belrive where Elizabeth is waiting for Victor's return

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- 2 Hughes comments on alchemy in relation to Shelley's text: "if we see the dark occult processes of alchemy as standing in for the other dialectical moment of Enlightenment [which is] its antisocial atomism and privatisation of knowledge in the service of capital – my analysis still holds. This points to the constraints that individual interest places on reason under capitalism, where reason is instrumental and not practiced consensually [...]. It is not so much alchemy that is denounced, [in *Frankenstein*,] as that darkness within modern science itself that works against the human liberty that this very same knowledge may enable. This darkness is made visible in the novel through Frankenstein's refusal to grant rights to his creation and his secretive possessiveness over knowledge" (12–3). Roszak, for his part, clearly isn't ashamed to make assumptions: "I have long felt that the *Frankenstein* Mary most wanted to offer the world lies hidden in an under-story that only Elizabeth could have written. [...] In placing an alchemical romance at the center of the novel, Mary Shelley was delving deeper into the psychological foundations of Western science than she may have consciously realized. In her own time, she could not have known the more exotic sources of alchemy; but her intuitive insight into what alchemy reveals about the sexual politics of science has proven to be astonishingly correct," is what Roszak explains in his "Author's Note" preceding the text (vii-viii).

(after forgiving him for the rape and the ensuing miscarriage she has suffered). As in other versions of *Frankenstein*, the creature has taken to calling itself Adam. Elizabeth overcomes her initial apprehension at his appearance and the two begin “an acquaintanceship more astonishing than any [she] might have imagined” (381), even though the (to her) mysterious stranger initially behaves “like some savage who had never learnt that conversation is the natural intercourse between people” (381). His eyes “have no hint of humanity to them. Rather, they are the eyes of a beast, staring with a blank, predatory curiosity” (378). Savage, predatory, animal-like – here and elsewhere the creature is associated with the wilderness that Elizabeth has fled to before. In time, the two need fewer and fewer spoken words to communicate. The extent to which communication is displaced toward another, apparently more intimate level is demonstrated in a scene in which the creature lets Elizabeth know the secret of his origin:

“You have asked who I am,” he says at last. “I cannot find the words. But there are other ways to speak.” [...] He reaches out his hand to take mine. [...] I am startled to feel the blood race to the roots of my hair. Not with fear. The contact is strangely rousing: daring, dangerous, and intimate – like touching a lion’s paw. [...] [A] bell-like vibration echoes in my ears, so near that it makes me dizzy. [...] My vision blurs as if I had grown drunk. The room spins; the walls vanish; I am in another place, dark, dank, and noisome. (392–93)

In a nightmarish vision, the creature makes Elizabeth witness Victor working on his secret experiments. “[M]y mind melts into his,” is how she describes these moments of telepathic sharing (403). They mirror the earlier scenes in which Victor and Elizabeth experience mergings of mind and body during their alchemical experiments. In both cases, the communal experiences depicted remain ambivalent – the alchemical experiments turn into rape; the creature’s touch remains “odious” (394) and will likewise, at the end of the novel, become violent. This stands in contrast to the perfect union Elizabeth is depicted to have experienced during her time in the wild.

Thus interference remains in many ways a male business in the logic of the novel, and surrender a female one (Elizabeth finds herself “lying weak and shivering against Adam’s breast” after their shared vision [394]). The novel deals in contrasts in (dis-)connection: spoken dialogue vs. mind-reading, well-behaved journal vs. scribbled diary, the divided world of science vs. the unified world of nature. Yet ultimately, many of the images of connection and intimacy that the text comes up with – the aforementioned full-moon initiation, for instance – have something ready-made about them. This stock-image quality counters the overt ambition of the novel – to reveal the ‘true Elizabeth’ in her immediate connection to her peers and natural/animal companions, including Adam – and complements the containing efforts of fictional editor Robert Walton. For the most part, the text is unable to come up with an imaginary of interpersonal connection that goes beyond well-established clichés, to the point where the characters whose true story we are supposed to learn remain hidden behind their stereotypes. The novel’s failure to stage the failure of patriarchal order in any complexity is something like a double exposure of the problem of intimacy in the context of identities and essences (such as ‘female nature’). Patriarchal order fails in the novel; and yet the novel likewise fails in its ostentatious critical ambition because its glorification of authenticity ultimately overrides any awareness that identity might be, at best, as Manning puts it, a “moment in a process.”

All this is linked to the problem of connectivity as problem of writing (or editorial) practice; and finds its end in Elizabeth’s lasting silence: her death. It is fictional editor Walton who becomes the voice of patriarchal bafflement whenever intimacy – including the intimacy of following somebody’s life story – is required. *Memoirs’* ambition to be a novel of disclosure, and its eventual failure to achieve this, with Robert Walton being the figure of this failure, in combination manifest the whole dilemma of a politics that searches for ‘truthfulness’ where it cannot leave behind preformed identities. It shows *Memoirs* as a novel on the brink: the attempt to deconstruct objectification and ‘tell things as they were’ yields itself either stereotypes (the liberation of bodies in nightly rituals in the woods, under a full moon) or silence: the mediation through a prejudiced

editor which makes it impossible to tell whether we're actually learning the 'naked truth' about Elizabeth. There's no genuine imaginarity of intimacy available for the novel. Recognition constantly slides into appropriation – either patriarchal appropriation on the part of the protagonists; or identitarian appropriation on the part of the novel.

Walton's editing appears as deliberate showcase of misogynist prejudice. Worrying about a portrait of Elizabeth in his possession and how it does not show any indication of Elizabeth's sexual preferences, such as they are expressed in her text, Robert Walton asks, in one of the "Editor's Notes" inserted into the text (*Memoirs* 101–3): "Was it possible, I found myself speculating, that the cultivation of self-possession and high intelligence in woman must always risk the moral degeneracy that led to Elizabeth Frankenstein's undoing?" He is prompted to make this remark by two things: an unflattering self-description by Elizabeth in her journal, which he (ironically) wants to substitute by a "less subjective image," and a detailed investigation on his part of Elizabeth's physique – which betrays the erotic interest it does not voice actively, and which it then displaces into a patronising reflection on 'how to foster women's intellectual development without endangering their morals.' For according to Walton, the portrait shows Elizabeth as "a strikingly lovely woman in her late adolescence," with a "vividly memorable refinement to the face – the cheekbones high, the chin proud, the lips full." Her eyes are "frank and penetrating" and there is "no hint of virginal timidity in the gaze, but rather a vivacity of expression that bespeaks high intelligence and an enquiring mind untypical of her sex." Her "throat and shoulders match the delicacy of the visage, as does the tautness of the young bosom. I could not, indeed, cast my eye upon that fragile throat without ruminating morbidly upon how easily it was crushed in the hands that stopped this lady's life; that act could have been no more difficult than snapping the bones of a songbird." This is hardly the objective, disinterested description Walton promises the reader – "I will confess that this portrait occasioned great unease during my research," he admits. "Since my studies of these papers began, this captivating portrait has been before me constantly, displayed upon the desk where now I write. Not a day has passed but I have scrutinised it yet again, seeking to elicit the true character that

lay hidden beneath the chaste surface.” The portrait captivates him, yet it is displayed before him for his scrutiny: who is subject, who object during the editing of Elizabeth’s memoirs? Walton saves himself by retreating to the paternal position of the protector of female virtue.

Here and elsewhere, editor Walton presents himself as problematic mediator between Elizabeth and her readers, inhibiting precisely the impulse of disclosure or revelation that the novel is premised on. He oscillates between well-meaning but deluded and downright misogynist and in any case, he is clearly unreliable. Not only does he make clear, from the start, that he regards Elizabeth’s involvement in the alchemical-slash-tantric exercises she describes as a sign of “female degeneracy” (xvi) – without voicing comparable worry regarding Victor’s morals – and the alchemical texts the group are working from as “frankly obscene” and full of “sexual perversions” (163). He also admits right away in his editorial preface to Elizabeth’s memoirs that he left out parts of Victor’s narration in his first *Frankenstein* edition – namely, anything to do with alchemy, since it could have been, after all, “no more than the guilty rantings of a dying soul” (xv). Therefore, whenever editorial notes or footnotes appear as the text proceeds – where, for instance, Walton explains that he has only reproduced those parts of the letters, drawings, diary fragments included in Elizabeth’s journal “whose meaning was reasonably certain” (260) or where he declares that passages “were illegible and so have been omitted” (283) – readers are invited to doubt Walton’s judgment and left to wonder whether they are actually reading Elizabeth’s account as she did set it down herself, or whether Walton’s prejudices didn’t get the better of him. Voyeuristic desire, the ambition to set the record straight, a tendency to take recourse to established identities rather than establishing personal connection: the novel as a whole and its fictional editor Walton have quite a lot in common.

On the face of it, the text might seem to present intimacy as the truth behind and a potential relief from objectification and hierarchy; and yet, ultimately, intimacy remains a problem more than a solution for the novel. The change between orderly journal and more vivid, immediate diary format as well as the allusions to Elizabeth’s actual, physical writing practice (for instance the “smudged” entries in her diary

during her “feral” time [283]) allows for a certain play with Elizabeth’s presence, at some points seemingly shifting her closer to her audience; and yet because we are always reminded that there is an unreliable editor at work on these documents, the barriers through which Elizabeth speaks to us – standard language, journal form, her own collocation of documents and then most importantly, Walton’s editing, on top of it all – are held up, even consolidated. It is logical but also telling that Walton, as the barrier between readers and Elizabeth Frankenstein, always makes himself heard in connection with more immediate marks left by Elizabeth’s writing practice than those of a standardised alphabet allow: crumpled pages, wild drawings, anything hinting at affect not containable by ‘proper’ writing tends to elicit a commenting footnote from Walton, as if to remind the audience that they are dealing with an account twice removed from its groundings in experience. The erotic descriptions with which the novel abounds might *refer* to intimacy and connection; and yet if anything, it is the struggle we witness that brings us close to the *practice* of it: the struggle between intimate connection and editorial/scientific regimes of objectivity, but also the struggle of intimacy against its own clichéd depiction.

The ghostly narrative presence of Elizabeth, at odds with the text’s agenda of disclosure and unveiling, is mirrored in the equally obscure death at Adam’s hands that the story has in store for her. Adam’s animal nature appears to demand the removal of interpersonal barriers: “I have learnt that his eyes, like those of an animal, are deprived of human expression,” Elizabeth describes her companion. “They can but gaze blankly. And as with the beasts, one feels the greater pity, knowing their feeling must be locked away. If he hurts, one must feel the hurt with him; it will not show outwardly. If he sorrows, one must feel the sorrow; there will be no tears. What I feel now in his presence is an unbearable anguish” (395). She literally feels what the creature feels. Both in these encounters with the creature as well as in Elizabeth’s time in the wild, the novel seems to project an alternative to conventional sociality. Appropriately, her acquaintanceship with Adam, too, is reported in the more immediate, personal diary rather than in journal form. In some ways, then, Roszak’s story presents a vision of living together in which no one is a

specimen anymore because the position of observer, of (in the sense of the word) the *man* of science and letters, is abolished. The way in which Elizabeth and the creature – both marked as ‘natural’ beings – participate in each other’s experiences and thoughts allows for no such objective/objectifying detachment and disengagement, nor does it allow for representational modes of communication.

And yet such “radical sociability” (as Bill Hughes attests to Shelley’s novel [14]) has limits in Roszak’s story, even beyond Walton’s editorial interference. The immediacy the creature shares with Elizabeth does not prevent him from exerting the same patriarchal violence he has himself been subjected to (and is the product of). “My mind is like some dumb machine that can but mimic your mental habits,” the creature explains to Elizabeth at one point. “I know less than a peasant child who understands what it means to laugh and to weep. I have never laughed, nor can I shed tears. But there are things great Nature herself teaches, primitive truth the same everywhere for all beings. ‘An eye shall be taken for an eye, a tooth shall be taken for a tooth.’ This I understand. This is the justice of the beast” (396).

It is from remarks such as this one that Elizabeth understands that her death will be the revenge for Victor breaking his promise to produce a female companion for Adam, that she is the pawn in a struggle between creator and creature. She does not struggle against this fate, though. The novel ends with her resignedly preparing for death in her bridal chamber. Nature thus sacrifices nature (Adam sacrifices Elizabeth, that is) in the “iron balance” that the creature says he adheres to (396). He marks his justice as natural and yet, one is tempted to correct him, ‘an eye for an eye’ is a decidedly human rule.

Elizabeth – her writing practice, her mental and bodily life – remains a shadowy outline that we project simply because we know Walton is not giving us the truth; because we know that the truth of things lies somewhere between and beyond Elizabeth’s lines and her editor’s interference. The novel appears to conclude that non-segregated existence, free communion with nature and one another, is a vision, speculation, unavailable – as of now, at least – to direct experience. Where the creature transforms into a veritable parasite, cast out yet feeding from both or-

ders, the 'natural' as well as the 'scientific' one, Elizabeth remains representative of an alternative; she cannot be the status quo. The resignation with which she accepts her death as collateral damage seems only to speak to this. This might serve to emphasise the rigid, inflexible, and oppressive nature of 'male science,' which suffocates more 'natural' ways of being. Killing off Elizabeth is, in some sense, quite simply realistic. Yet there is also a self-effacing streak in this fictional character that it is not easily reconciled with the agenda of liberation that the novel clearly sets itself. It is not only that she forgives Victor for the rape, a fact that we might or might not find plausible depending on how we read the original occurrence, as well as how sympathetic we decide to be with Victor and how he ends up suffering from the chaos he has caused. There is also the somewhat unexplained readiness with which Elizabeth sacrifices herself into a marriage that she knows to be doomed: "Father's declining health lends his request [that Elizabeth and Victor be married] the urgency of a dying man's last wish. I quickly resign myself to accepting the marriage as inevitable; toward this end my life flows as surely as the streams run from the mountains to the sea" (412) is all the explanation that we get. That she lets herself be shut in on Victor's orders into the marriage chamber at the inn at Evian even though she seems to be perfectly aware that she will meet her death there appears the ultimate symbol for her willingness to self-sacrifice.<sup>3</sup>

These contradictions; Walton's editorial interferences; the fact that the alchemical union manifests itself as an act of rape; the fact that the creature with its 'mind-merging' powers of clairvoyance and telepathy ultimately kills the "female child of Nature" Elizabeth: on all levels, intimacy and interpersonal connection remain a problem in *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein*. There is, on top of it all, something appropriative in the implicit voyeurism of the novel's basic premise – presenting the

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3 "[G]arment by garment, I let my streaming clothes fall from me and lie at my feet until I stand naked in the centre of the room," Elizabeth's diary reports. "I stare long at the canopied bed that fills most of the chamber. I think: [...] *I shall lie upon this bed like the sacrificial lamb awaiting the expiatory stroke. And I shall not rise to see the light of day again*" (419).

“bold, hauntingly erotic retelling of *Frankenstein*,” the “shocking tale that Mary Shelley dared not write”: here we have feminine mystery revealed. Doesn’t this repeat the same baffled, pseudo-objective inquisition into ‘female nature,’ minus the moralisations, that editor Walton is preoccupied with, and doesn’t this then keep the protagonist of the book in the position of being an object of study?<sup>4</sup> The novel seems caught up, then, in a curious position between opposing demands: the urge to depict interindividual connection without the interference and distancing effect of ‘objective’ identities; and the inability to spell this out in any but the terms licensed by the very symbolic order that it sets out to attack.

### A More Cryptic Feminist Text

It seems that canonical feminist criticism of *Frankenstein* finds itself before some of the very same stumbling blocks over which Roszak’s novel so gracelessly trips, and recognises the need to ward off a certain essentialism: To “leave the question [...] with an easy recourse to the female signature or to female being, is either to beg it or to biologize it,” Mary Jacobus says (138).<sup>5</sup> Nancy Armstrong has argued that “at the heart of the new [read: 1980’s] feminist criticism, then, one finds the familiar theme

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- 4 For comparison: *Penny Dreadful*, as discussed in Part Two, goes about this in a less one-sided manner. We are certainly prompted to reject the chauvinistic attitude displayed by Victor; but then again, Lily is a sufficiently ambivalent character and Victor is sufficiently helpless to make for a certain balance between the two.
  - 5 Of course, this in some ways quite simply harks back to an old – and arguably unsolved – feminist problem, put succinctly by Joan Wallach Scott: “Feminism was a protest against women’s political exclusion; its goal was to eliminate ‘sexual difference’ in politics, but it had to make its claim on behalf of ‘women’ (who were discursively produced through ‘sexual difference’). To the extent that it acted for ‘women,’ feminism produced the ‘sexual difference’ it sought to eliminate. This paradox – the need both to accept *and* to refuse ‘sexual difference’ – was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history” (3–4).

of ‘individual vs. society’ [...]. Like the maiden and harlot, such opposites cooperate to authorize a single notion of the self” and obfuscate the fact that “it is finally ‘language’ that produces the self, normal or deviant, rather than the other way around” (1254–56). Some readings derive a distinctively queer effect from such inquiries into the productions of self. Halberstam insists that critics generally don’t acknowledge how radical the monster’s hybridity is, as they fail to see that Shelley’s creature expresses “the potentiality of any one form of othering to become another” (30). Bette London argues that there is, in fact, a “circulation of the position of monstrosity” in the story, a “destabiliz[ation of] the sexual hierarchies that underwrite the novel’s meaning, making the *male* body the site of an ineradicable materiality. Yet the discomposing presence of that body remains the thing most resistant to critical insight; [...] it is preeminently visible but persistently unseen, consigned to modern oblivion” (255). It is because male anxieties are staged “*across* the female body [my emphasis],” and because *Frankenstein* criticism is no different in this regard – hence its fixation on “authority and bodily limits” – that *Frankenstein* comes to appear as being about *female* vulnerability (256).<sup>6</sup>

Beyond questions of (to bring the debate down to an admittedly much simplifying formula) ‘essentialism vs. constructivism,’ or ‘male vs. female vulnerability,’ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has remarked – even at the heyday of feminist criticism of *Frankenstein* – that whatever interpretation we go for, there remains something weird about *Frankenstein* as a feminist text: “Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* [is] a text of nascent feminism that remains cryptic, I think, simply because it does not speak the language of feminist individualism which we have come to hail as the language of high feminism within English literature” (254). In other words, according to Spivak *Frankenstein*’s critique of oppression and marginalisation does not presuppose the position of ‘woman in society’ as a given – nor does it, strictly speaking, illustrate the production of

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6 In that regard, it is quite telling that it is the male and monstrous body that is assembled according to the conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet (“the representation of the loved one as a composite of details, a collection of parts”: the straight black lips, the flowing black hair, the pearly white teeth [London 261]).

women as subjects, through language or otherwise. It is less specific and more ambivalent than that:

Frankenstein is not a battleground of male and female individualism articulated in terms of sexual reproduction (family and female) and social subject-production (race and male). That binary opposition is undone in Victor Frankenstein's laboratory – an artificial womb where both projects are undertaken simultaneously, though the terms are never openly spelled out[.]

as Spivak explains (254–55). “[M]asculine and feminine individualists are hence reversed and displaced” (256) – individualism in general, I would add, is destabilised, and yet not rejected pointblank. “Shelley differentiates the Other, works at the Caliban/Ariel distinction,” showing that “the absolutely Other cannot be selfed,” until “distinctions of human individuality themselves seem to fall away from the novel” (257–58). They fall away, however, not in favour of an unlimited intimacy<sup>7</sup> but in favour of forms of companionship or community which rely on the limits of the individual as much as they work at their deconstruction. Rose’s film shows the tragic consequences of subordinating life to a static individual form in the bitter fate it envisions for the creature. Roszak’s novel, curiously ambivalent, grapples with those limits and their status, alternately criticising and re-inscribing them. The somewhat crude quality of Roszak’s adaptation might, in this sense, result precisely from the fact that the novel insists on translating *Frankenstein* into a “language of feminist individualism” that *Frankenstein* doesn’t actually speak.

## Vulnerability and Imagination

A critique specifically of female circumstances is in no way an illegitimate reading of *Frankenstein*. And yet – as Spivak, too, points out – there is a certain tendency, among such readings, to position their critique at a point where vital forces have already been formed into categorised

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7 A phrase I appropriate from Tim Dean’s thus-titled book.

life. It is worthwhile, therefore, to focus more closely on how vital forces and political agency interact both beyond and before identifiable, categorizable personhood. This is a matter of gender, but not exclusively so. In Manning's understanding, for example, the question of gender(ing) addresses precisely the issue of individuation, of the formation of vital energies into (metastable) identities – and vice versa, individuation is at stake in all processes of (en)gender(ing). ('Gender,' as Manning points out, is etymologically related to 'generate.' "To engender is to undertake a reworking of form [and] to potentialize matter" [90].) A problematic politics of gender is, in this understanding – and as Spivak suggests as well – a problematic politics of self. "In positing gender as a principle of strict differentiation, form is placed unto matter in a way that calls forth a complete individual rather than an individuation" (Manning 93). If we acknowledge, however, that (en)genderings are "contingent on the environments through which they individuate" (98) and that "within engendering is a virtual form" (92), the field widens. Gender, specifically, and the self, more generally, become "equal to [their] emergence," processes not only of defining and limiting but also of enabling (89).

This approach implies a re-evaluation of vulnerability, of the permeability of individuals which, however, can never be naïvely affirmative. Vulnerability needs to be, as Judith Butler elaborates (for instance in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*), acknowledged as both the source of and an obstacle to political agency, both produced by power and the condition of resistance to it; a feature of individuality possessing, as it were, two sides or aspects which both, moreover, concern interindividual relations as much as they concern the intraindividual entanglement of mind with matter, the organic with the symbolic, the natural with the cultural. Such inter- and "intra-actions" between the political and the physical, such back-and-forth between strength and vulnerability, keep playing across the body of Frankenstein's creature in its various incarnations and draw into question any implications, in criticism or fiction, that vulnerability would concern only culture, only the symbolic, and be absent from 'natural' existence.<sup>8</sup> Alongside

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8 "Intra-actions" is the term Karen Barad coins in her *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

the expressivity of physical depth that we see in the marked-ness of the creature and its role for plot (Part One), alongside the forces of procreation through repetition (Part Two), there is a striking source of power to be found in vulnerability so that the individual ultimately comes to appear as self-possessed in its openness, more than in its self-containment; and this latter factor, too, sits at the heart of the workings of narrative fiction and can be seen with extraordinary clarity in the *Frankenstein* complex.

The notion of an unfinished- or openness as constitutive not only of gendered (Manning), but of individuated existence in general (Butler, Souriau) firmly dispels any ideas of self-contained, autonomous individuals – without, for that matter, dissolving the individual entirely in relationality or affect. The outlines of individuals become something more akin to border zones, sites of negotiating between inside and outside, me and not-me. How does this reframe what we have come to accept as, so to speak, the labour division behind stories, where one person gets to tell, and the other gets to listen? Being authors or audiences turns out to be not so much a predetermined feature of individuals but a situational modification of the existences which individuals inhabit.<sup>9</sup> While the manifestation and shape of fiction certainly depends on the sensitivities, interests, skills, knowledge, and so forth, of the producers and recipients involved, the source and trigger of such activities is ultimately the *encounter* of producers, recipients, and beings of fiction, rather than their respective individual predispositions; a collaboration even across ontological divides (Souriau’s “drama of three characters”). It is a meeting, an approaching (or, in fact, a failure to approach) that supports the idea that the beings of fiction themselves (Victor, for instance, or the monster) have a say in the matter.

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9 Although of course, all kinds of factors can determine the respective sensitivities of different individuals to different encounters – the point is not to promote the egalitarian distribution of ‘talent’ but to argue for acknowledging the contribution of more factors than that of individual predisposition to the emergence of works of fiction.

“It is quite true that the work depends on its receiver, but the notion of imagination does not account very well for this dependency,” Latour argues (*Inquiry* 246); by which he means to say that even if we abandon the ‘intention of the author/artist’ as decisive criterion for making sense of a work of art or fiction, the solution lies not in bestowing all the authority on the reader, or audience. Rather, acknowledging the *distribution* of agency in the paradigm of fiction means to allow, conceptually, for a complex mutual engendering of creators, works, and audiences. None of the three instances appears *as such* (as creator, work, or audience, that is) without the other two involved. It is not only that beings of fiction depend on our investment even while they dictate, in part, its form; it is also that ‘author’ and ‘audience’ are, in turn, forms of self shaped by the works themselves. “A work of art *engages* us,” Latour insists,

and if it is quite true that it has to be interpreted, at no point do we have the feeling that we are free to do ‘whatever we want’ with it. If the work needs a *subjective* interpretation, it is in a very special sense of the adjective: we are *subject* to it, or rather we *win* our subjectivity through it. Someone who says ‘I love Bach’ becomes in part a subject capable of loving that music [...]. If the interpretations of a work diverge so much, it is not at all because the constraints of reality and truth have been ‘suspended’ but because the work must possess many folds, engender many partial subjectivities [...] (*Inquiry* 241)

Accordingly, Latour argues that whenever we have been “dispatched” by fiction (into “another space, another time, another figure or character or atmosphere or reality” [*Inquiry* 246–47]), we

have surely not been dispatched thanks to the flesh-and-blood author, who doesn’t know very well what she has done and who, as a good artist, may lie like a rug about her own identity. And to whom is she addressing herself? Certainly not to ‘me,’ here, now, but to someone, a function, a position, that varies with each work, with each detail of the work, and that in no way pre-exists her – a function or position that I agree to fill and occupy, or not. Here is a second level, situated *beneath* the work, that begins to shape both a virtual sender and a vir-

tual receiver – speakers and addressees inscribed within the folds of the work. (*Inquiry* 247)

James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* zooms in on precisely such encounters and inscriptions. "Imagine yourselves standing by the wreckage of the mill," Mary Shelley tells us as the images from the frame story, in which she passes the evening with telling the story to Percy and Byron, blend over into the images from the 'story proper.' Her words thus provide a sound bridge, that is, an actual route of access whose spatial quality is emphasised further by the fact that Mary raises her arm into the vague direction of 'out there' while we move 'into' her story.<sup>10</sup> This blending of images and sounds draws out the process of "dispatch" ("[m]usic begins, a text is read, a drawing sketched out and 'there we go'" [Latour, *Inquiry* 246]). It emphasises how

as soon as the raw materials begin to vibrate toward forms or figures that cannot, however, be detached from them, and toward whose peculiarities they never cease to refer, two new levels are immediately generated, the one ahead of, beyond, what is expressed, level n+1, and the other, beneath, behind, but also ahead, level n-1, that of the virtual addressee. It is through this double movement of sending ahead and pulling back that the world populates itself with other stories, other places, other actors, and that the possible positions of actor, creator, and subject appear. (*Inquiry* 248)

The figural and the iterative, hence temporal dimensions of fiction thus open up the field of subjectivity in a way particular to (narrative) fiction – in a way, that is, that reveals this field to be the field of vulnerability and relationality and the field of individuality and power in equal parts. Such magnifying as we find in Whale's *Bride* film offers up the process of the ascription of subjectivities as Latour describes it for closer inspection, revealing how such ascriptions depend on and shift in relation to the roles we ascribe to the other actors involved in the process: Mary Shelley

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10 Ann Marie Adams has provided a detailed analysis of this sound bridge and other filmic-technical detail of the film.

appears as author, Byron and Percy Shelley appear as her audience in the introductory scenes to Whale's film – in relation to the main film and the story it tells. Simultaneously, though, the Shelleys and Byron are fictional impersonations, and their authors and audience are we, who are watching the film now, the filmmakers, as well as whoever has watched the film before and will watch it in the future. Whale's film showcases relationality by zooming in on the act of following a story (across a sound bridge, in the direction of Mary Shelley's outstretched arm, to 'out there'). This work is indeed "folded" (to use Latour's expression), as the story is triggered not once, but twice: once in and by the beginning of the movie (possibly the darkening of the theatre space and the opening curtain, figures appearing on the darkened screen, the opening credits, the opening score, the first dialogue, ...), and then another time by Mary Shelley saying: "Imagine yourselves standing by the wreckage of the mill" while the living room scene blends over into the inner diegetic setting. Such "folding" multiplies not only the stories told by the film but also the subjective or self-positionings (as producer, participant, recipient) that the film licenses. The morphing of images and sounds happening on-screen, one half fading out and the other fading in, with Mary raising her arm in the 'direction' of the plot – to 'where the story is' – draws attention to the "double movement of sending ahead and pulling back" that positions individuals as speakers or listeners, creators or audience, or, in fact, the beings of fiction themselves.

## Double Casting II

This facilitates another perspective on the self-estrangement that feminist criticism of *Frankenstein* puts so much emphasis on; it helps to translate this estrangement into a constitutive strangeness, a more native vulnerability that holds as much danger for the individual as it holds the chance for liberation. Mary, in the beginning of the film, can be positioned both as creator (and thus, in a sense, also audience) of the story of the main film; and as being a protagonist (a being of fiction) herself. She is both representative of a historical person, and an ostentatious fiction-

alisation of that person; the latter circumstance becoming all the more tangible when the actress playing Mary Shelley, Elsa Lanchester, reappears as the female creature at the end of the film. Unlike the male creature, played by Boris Karloff in his (in)famous make-up, the female creature that Victor fashions in *Bride of Frankenstein* is monstrous mostly in terms of hairstyle. Her face is clearly recognisable as Lanchester's face – and thus as that of Mary Shelley earlier in the film. While her costume has been changed to a white dress looking like a mixture of hospital gown and wedding dress, a scar along her jawline is the only visible trace of surgery on her. Even though her manner is, of course, decidedly transformed – from domestic creature, suggestive undertones to her angelic appearance notwithstanding, to jerky head movements which make her appear rather like a bird of prey – her facial features remain unchanged, are emphasised, even, in a series of close-ups comparable to those in which Karloff's face is presented in the 1931 film and at the beginning of this one (*Bride of Frankenstein* 01:07:16–09:15). Does this double casting – which is not altogether different from that in Dear's and Boyle's stage play – tie actor and role, 'bodily material' and figure closer together, or does it foreground the artificial, contingent nature of this connection? To put it differently: does the Bride become more 'real' through being incorporated by the same actress who also plays Shelley – or does Shelley become less real through being incorporated by the same actress as the Bride?<sup>11</sup>

The final scenes of the film establish further parallels to the beginning, besides Lanchester's appearance: the Bride ends up positioned between Frankenstein and the creature on a sofa precisely as Mary was positioned earlier between Percy and Byron. A case can even be made for further framing strategies employed: mid-film, the ominous Dr. Pretorius presents his research to a reluctant Frankenstein, promoting a co-operation between the two of them. His accomplishments consist in a number of comic miniature half-automata that he keeps in glass tubes, where they make funny sounds and seem quite absorbed in their own

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11 As is Karloff's, the Bride actress's identity is only given as "...?" in the end credits of the film.

world. He has succeeded at, as he puts it, growing – rather than forming – his creatures “as nature does, from seed” (00:20:15-23:28): this is clearly a film about female creation (women’s creative output as well as women *as* creative output), and inserting Pretorius’ presentation in the middle of it foreshadows what is to come in a miniature – and, in many ways, queer – version. All in all, the film thus quite frequently puts the audience in a superordinate position, at one remove from sharing the involvement of the protagonists: not only do various exclamations of “It’s alive” appeal to the audience’s recollection of Whale’s earlier film. The figure of Pretorius, moreover, plays with the gap between the perspective of the protagonists and the knowledge of the audience – for instance when he fools Frankenstein with regard to the source of the female body on which they are working. He claims that she is the victim of an accident whose body his assistant Karl has stolen from a hospital – the lie is obvious to the audience, but Frankenstein seems oblivious to it (and also, rather willing to believe). “There are always accidental deaths occurring,” Frankenstein muses, and Pretorius, in mock regret, echoes: “Always...” (00:50:36-56:40).<sup>12</sup>

There is, to say the least, more than one layer to the story that *Bride of Frankenstein* tells, and all the tongue-in-cheek allusions, parodistic repetitions, and foreshadowing emphasise that point in addition to the double casting and introductory scenes. The latter in particular work to establish a metaleptic frame which – depending on which perspective one takes – either has (the historical) Mary Shelley ‘jump into’ the diegesis, or the monstrous Bride jump out of it. This oscillation of status not only shows that the various subjective positions surrounding a story can only be attributed relationally. In making the same actress appear both as storyteller and as object of the plot (the film is *about* the bride of Franken-

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12 Over the course of the film, Pretorius also claims two different things (gin and cigars) to be his only weakness. The glee with which Pretorius generally goes about his business throughout the film makes him appear too cunning for proper self-delusion, so that one must assume that the two contradictory claims are made on purpose – which leaves the audience as the only possible addressee for whatever the message is that is conveyed in that way.

stein, after all), the film prevents us from understanding such subjectivities as unitary, as stable one-to-one unit of individual and role. The subjectivities offered are not only mobile but also split or at least layered as one actress covers two roles – where Dear and Boyle’s *Frankenstein* seems to expand individual spheres, Whale’s film seems rather to partition them, inserting a certain amount of alterity, of leeway, as it were, where ‘normally’ we would slip easily into the positions of author or audience offered to us by a story.

### Address and Response

Criticism has long since identified this split as specific feature of *Frankenstein* and its production context. Gilbert and Gubar, for instance, have claimed that

the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually in some sense the *author’s* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage. Indeed, much of the poetry and fiction written by women conjures up this mad creature so that female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be. (78)

They interpret the creature as a “female in disguise” and point out the parallels between the monster’s and Mary Shelley’s situation and thus declare Shelley’s novel a manifestation of self-estrangement. Critics investigating Whale’s film have pointed out that this motif repeats itself in the double casting of Elsa Lanchester as Mary and as Bride: “Whale and his scriptwriters and Gilbert and Gubar” choose a “common symbolic mechanism – the doubling of the demure author with a fictive monster.” Whale’s film “literally envision[s] the female writer as a decorous woman who expresses her ‘unfeminine’ feelings of passion and rage in a wild creation that is a dark picture of herself,” Ann Marie Adams claims (409–10).

Such readings emphasise the influence of external demands on individuals (of demureness, proper conduct, and so on), which ultimately exert such pressure that some aspects of those individuals break or split off and are, for instance, sourced out into the image of a nameless monster. These readings thus depend on the assumption not only that “no one transcends the matrix of relations that gives rise to the subject” but that “it might be that the constituting relations have a certain pattern of breakage in them, that they actually constitute and break us at the same time” (Butler, *Senses* 8–9). There is a certain perversity to this captivity because it implies that we depend, in both positive and negative, enhancing and restrictive ways, on what possesses the power to destroy us (“What does it mean,” Butler therefore asks, “to require what breaks you?” [*Senses* 9]). It might well be that Frankenstein’s creature in general expresses precisely this perversity of fundamental relationality: in its capacity as being of fiction, that is, as a being receptive and demanding of subjective investment, but a monstrous being nonetheless.

Such captivity, however, simultaneously constitutes a specific capacity – it is, as mentioned earlier, “uneasy *and* promising” (Butler). It is not only a restriction in being but also a potential for action – an aspect that deserves more attention than it receives in a reading such as Adams’ or Gilbert’s and Gubar’s. Where the National Theatre’s *Frankenstein* brings to the fore the relational nature of being and action – of being-in-action, if you like – *Bride* helps to further clarify the ethical consequences, but also the ethical potential, of the coincidence of production and reception. After all, the necessity to behave toward something enables in some ways also the ability to respond to it. That is, the “encounter with a world I never chose,” the “involuntary exposure to otherness as the condition of relationality,” not only sub-jects the individual but provides it with its ethical capacity. If “the ethical describes a structure of address,” what is addressed is not simply the individual, but the individual in its capacity as respondent:

What follows it that form of relationality that we might call ‘ethical’: a certain demand or obligation impinges upon me, and the response relies on my capacity to affirm this having been acted on, formed into

one who can respond to this or that call. Aesthetic relationality also follows: something impresses itself upon me, and I develop impressions that cannot be fully separated from what acts on me. (Butler, *Senses* 12)

If *Bride of Frankenstein*, then, takes its cue from an explicit scene of address (“Would you like to hear what happened after that?”, “Imagine yourselves standing...”), it also posits structures of response – and these responses in turn are as much active (I respond) as passive (I am made to respond by what “impresses” on me).

*Bride* splits the position of its “virtual sender” (Latour) – there is the material-imaginary dynamic, the cooperation of lights and sound, that constitutes the overall beginning of the movie and that projects its own source; and there is the iteration of that very moment roughly five minutes later, when Mary directs viewers into the main body of the film (an imaginary that also Whale’s first *Frankenstein* film plays with by having producer Carl Laemmle appear on a theatre stage with an un-raised curtain). This double projection of sender positions, in particular in combination with the double casting of Elsa Lanchester, makes for a heightened multiplicity and optionality of viewpoints that inserts into each possible position – as sender, receiver, or indeed as being of fiction – a certain strangeness to itself (which might, not least, be a crucial factor in the overall campiness of the movie). Is this split necessarily a torturous one, provoked by unfavourable sociocultural demands – on, for instance, as classical feminist readings suggest, women in general, and women authors in particular?

And further, how does this multiplicity and strangeness play itself out on the other side of the equation, that is, for the position of the “virtual receiver” (Latour) that is projected at the same moment and by the same dynamic that the “virtual sender” is posited? What happens when a work, as *Bride of Frankenstein* does, offers the position of receiver to me by virtue of being a work of fiction – and then offers it to me (the ‘virtual-receiver-me’) *again*, by fictionalising and integrating authorial practice? Senders and receivers are then not only virtualised, but ‘doubly virtualised’ through the narrative frame: they accompany themselves, as it

were, as they follow the story. Beyond – or rather, before – the self-reflection that might result from such a split, there is keeping yourself company: the possibility, supported emphatically by *Bride of Frankenstein*, that individuals-as-recipients invest in their own investment, and thus, in a sense, react to their own fragility in the way they react to the beings of fiction, who impose “such fragility, such responsibility,” who are so “eager to be able to continue to exist through the ‘we’ whom they help to figure” (Latour, *Inquiry* 249). Such ‘self-company’ is in no sense an escape from or the rejection, through indulgence, of self-critique; it is even, strictly speaking, self-critique’s precondition, allowing, as it does, the deconstruction of identities without forcing their dissolution. It thus not only supports a general critique of an identity politics of equivalence (according to which individual, body, and position or role are supposedly all in stable congruence), it also emphasises the double value of individuality, which acquires meaning in relation to both isolation *and* community, vulnerability *and* agency. The creature’s peculiar existence consists in the manifestation of this double value: damaged from one perspective, unfinished from the other.

## Both Strange and Familiar

“Imagine yourselves” (...standing by the wreckage of the mill): what does the filmic Mary Shelley invite her audience to do at the beginning of Whale’s film? Isn’t it, in some sense, an invitation to make “use” of oneself quite in the sense that Agamben understands the term – that is, a relation which acknowledges ‘inappropriability,’ but where this acknowledgment doesn’t preclude intimacy, or privacy? “We can call ‘intimacy’ use-of-oneself as relation with an inappropriable,” Agamben says.

Whether it is a matter of bodily life in all its aspects [...] or of the special presence-absence to ourselves that we live in moments of solitude, that of which we have an experience of intimacy is our being held in relation with an inappropriable zone of non-consciousness. Here famil-

arity with self reaches an intensity all the more extreme and jealous insofar as it is no way translated into anything that we could master. (*Use of Bodies* 91–2)

Plausibly, following a story – a practice showcased in its unique characteristics by such stagings as Whale’s filmic frame – offers quite such moments of “presence-absence” to oneself where alienation or distance from and knowledge or experience of self work together; and it is plausible, also, to assume that it does precisely because of the characteristics of the encounter which it facilitates: encounters where agency and suffering are re-organised and where agency is, fundamentally, collective and/or collaborative.<sup>13</sup>

A familiarity that for all its familiarity we can nevertheless not master: isn’t this what life ‘as we know it’ becomes when it expresses itself as fiction? Individual being doesn’t side with either solitary essence or singular occurrence, to use terms brought up earlier in relation to Rose’s film and Roszak’s novel, but is rather in the continuous passing from solitary essence into singular occurrence, and in this passing exhausts

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13 One of the most vicious methods at the availability of sovereign power is the appropriation of this intimacy. “Against this attempt [...] it is necessary to remember that intimacy can preserve its political meaning only on condition that it remains inappropriable. *What is common is never a property but only the inappropriable*. The sharing of this inappropriable is love,” Agamben insists (93). In relation to Agamben’s concept of use, see also Roberto del Valle Alcalá’s highly illuminative reading of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. He argues that the novel stages both the drama of the Western division of life into its bare (*zoe*) and its biopolitical (*bios*) aspect, and a possible exit strategy from these restrictions in terms of use and inoperativity. The creature’s monstrosity, specifically, “signifies that operation whereby the possibility of an inseparable *zoe*, as irreducible process and potentiality, is forcibly inscribed with incompleteness, with lack of form, and hence, with the attributes of bare life.” Monstrosity is thus precisely “not a fact internal to the creature’s life” which, however, has nonetheless been forcefully injected into that very life (622). Incidentally, I find this a useful argument for calling the creature ‘monstrous’ in spite of the scruples we might harbour to continue applying such a disastrous label. ‘Monstrous’ about the creature is precisely the fact that he is *continuously made to embody* this inscription, and cannot escape from it.

itself, again and again, continuously on the verge between strange and familiar. Might not this just be why it is hard for us to get fiction (or life, for that matter) *right* – not because there is an essence to be expressed correctly (as in conventional ideas of ‘self-realisation’), but because there is a passage to be secured, and a balance to be upheld? In that sense, the communicative matrix of fiction offers a particularly productive estrangement of senders and receivers from themselves.

What comes through here is, once again, the implications of understanding existence as modal, which is as relevant for Latour’s “anthropology of the moderns” as it is for Agamben’s concept of use; which can be connected to Merleau-Ponty’s “differentiation in proximity” (Butler) and Butler’s internally impossible subject; and is nowhere as visible, as Souriau points out, as in the instaurations of art and fiction. Agamben captures the logic of ‘mode’ in an accessible metaphor when he says: “We are accustomed to think in a *substantival* mode, while mode has a constitutively *adverbial* nature, it expresses not ‘what’ but ‘how’ being is” (*Use of Bodies* 164). And since ‘hows,’ contrary to ‘whats,’ never stop evolving, modal being implicates a necessary, constitutive, and continual shift of beings against themselves. This meeting of strangeness and familiarity is precisely what Agamben captures in the concept of use. “In a modal ontology, being uses-itself, that is to say, it constitutes, expresses, and loves itself in the affection that it receives from its own modifications” (*Use* 165).

In Latour’s “anthropology,” this implication of a modal ontology becomes particularly clear when he discusses subjective interiority, and the making thereof. For “the continuity of self,” too, “is not ensured by its authentic and, as it were, native core, but by its capacity to let itself be carried along, carried away, by forces capable at every moment of shattering it or, on the contrary, of installing themselves in it.” (The name that Latour gives to this mode in which subjectivity exists is “metamorphosis” [196]). “This does not mean,” Latour qualifies, “that subjects lack cavities, but that any such must always be *dug out* by an effort of mining” (188). The self, then, “is no longer a madman who talks to himself in search of authenticity: one speaks to that self, it answers, it has an apparatus at its

disposal” for its own instauration and continuation (194). It keeps itself company.

A modal ontology, then, is an ontology of alteration, where being yourself is being not yourself but holding together, anyway; where any one thing holds together only by going through processes of changing and becoming something else. Crucially, a modal ontology is an ontology that has its own ethics. In fact, ontology and ethics do not figure as separate domains anymore but rather meet on a “threshold of indifference”: just as “in ethics character (*ethos*) expresses the irreducible being-thus of an individual, so also in ontology, what is in question is the ‘as’ of being, the mode in which substance is its modifications” (Agamben, *Use* 172). If the ‘how’ of being is at stake with being in every instance, then ‘living’ and ‘living well’ become one and the same question.

As the National Theatre’s *Frankenstein* and also Whale’s *Bride* film have illustrated: being-as-modification confounds distinctions between agency and passion, between the part that does something and the part that something is done to (in Agamben’s words, it implies “the immanence [...] of the passive in the active” [*Use* 166]). Likewise, it confounds distinctions between the familiar and the strange, locating one in the other. The ethical implication of this – in general, but in particular for fiction as mode of existence – is one of non-appropriation. The practice of fiction is a reflection on freedom, though not quite in the way that we may think: not because fiction makes me ‘forget myself’ or ‘forget reality for a while,’ but because beneath this impression of forgetting lies the obscure intuition that it was never a question of ‘having myself’ to begin with, and that consequentially, it can never be a question of ‘having’ the other, either. If there is a way to ‘have myself,’ it lies precisely in the capacity to bear alteration without dissolving, which is not only what we mean when we give somebody the advice to ‘own’ something (a character flaw, an embarrassing habit), but also what we do when we follow stories. Ultimately, the ethical implication is that there is, strictly speaking, no ‘pure’ ethics of stories, just as a ‘pure’ ontology of stories cannot be written. One will always and inevitably cross over into the other.

## Genuine Transformations

Such alteration can of course be impeded. This is what happens, according to Agamben's biopolitical framework, if living beings are split into a politically relevant part, a personal essence, the part able to govern, and a core of 'mere life,' a part that can be governed but is never allowed to properly feed into the form of the political individual. Keeping the passage open, however, would lead being-otherwise (being strange, multiple, inappropriable) and being-inalienable to coincide in a given individualised existence, pre-empting the segregation of individuals and attributes that, for instance, Rose's Victor attempts, and beyond which Roszak's novel cannot move. This, as I read it, is what Agamben means to suggest by distinguishing between forms of life and forms-of-life. The "concept of life," Agamben says, "will not be truly thought as long as the biopolitical machine, which has always already captured it within itself by means of a series of divisions and articulations, has not been deactivated. Until then, bare life will weigh on Western politics like an obscure and impenetrable sacral residue" (*Use* 203).<sup>14</sup> Where 'life' has come to designate "the bare common presupposition that it is always possible to isolate in each of the innumerable forms of life," that is, where terminological distinctions between *bios* and *zoe* disappear and the term 'life' becomes, for the most part, congruous with the latter, form-of-life in turn indicates a 'unity of equals' between the two: "with the term *form-of-life*, by contrast, we understand a life that can never be separated from

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14 Although a closer investigation of the issue goes beyond the scope of the discussion here, it is worth mentioning Butler's critique of Agamben's notion of bare life: "[O]f course, we need a language to describe that status of unacceptable exposure, but we have to be careful that the language we use does not further deprive such populations of all forms of agency and resistance" (*Assembly* 79–80). Then again, the very restrictedness of our means of expression when it comes to finding such a language confirms precisely Agamben's point (that unless the biopolitical machine is deactivated, the concept of life will not be truly thought. The expression "Frankenstein's monster," by the way, is a case in point. We have no other name for it).

its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate and keep distinct something like a bare life" (*Use* 207).

Arne de Boever has engaged, in his *Narrative Care*, with Agamben's biopolitics in the context of a theory of the novel which includes the potential of a care of self. De Boever argues that biopolitics and the novel are connected not only through historical origin but through the practice of managing (governing, writing – caring for or taking care of) lives and that therefore, the novel offers a properly differentiated critique of biopolitics, one which allows us to see that one and the same instrument or technique (for instance of the welfare state) might turn out beneficial in one circumstance, and detrimental in the next (hence de Boever's use of the concept of *pharmakon*). Much of his analysis clashes with understanding fiction as cooperative practice and mode of existence, even though some of the questions that keep turning up in his examination of contemporary novels could just as well have been inspired by the *Frankenstein* complex (and indeed, *Frankenstein* keeps turning up in *Narrative Care*): "How to explain the liveliness of [a literary character's] life, the fact that one cares about characters, sometimes more so than about real people, in spite of the fact that they are not real (as we know very well...)? What questions for ethics and politics does the aesthetic being of the character pose?" (*Narrative Care* 47).

I would disagree, for instance, with de Boever's reading that the lives of literary characters have something of encamped life about them, in the sense that they are bare life manipulated into pure political relevance: "Indeed, do not readers [...] to a certain extent expect that every gesture or detail of a character's life, including the way he or she dresses or even walks, has a precise meaning, and is caught in a series of functions and effects that can be meticulously studied?" de Boever asks. "Is this not how we tend to read novels – in the expectation that everything that is present on the page ultimately adds up to a meaningful whole?" (71). I would much rather link the lives of literary characters and generally beings of fiction to the idea of a form-of-life and argue that everything about them seems significant precisely because they do not allow the reduction of political life into bare life or vice versa: from the "scission between man and citizen," Agamben argues,

there follows that [scission] between bare life, ultimate and opaque bearer of sovereignty, and the multiple forms of life abstractly recodified into juridical-social identities (voter, employee, journalist, student, but also HIV-positive, transvestite, porn star, senior citizen, parent, woman), which all rest on the former. [...] A political life, which is to say, one oriented toward the idea of happiness and cohering in a form-of-life, is thinkable only starting from emancipation from this scission. (*Use* 209–10)

Foregrounding this concept changes de Boever's argument that in the novel, "the author's law coincides to the letter with the lives of the individuals being described," and that this is what links the novel and the camp in their modernity (69). Souriau, for instance, (and Latour, too), while they do not concern themselves with anything so detailed as a theory of literary characters (or even a suggestion as to what such a theory could look like), both insist that "works" or "beings of fiction" (and "beings of fiction" plausibly include, as one of their most important manifestations, literary characters) are created cooperatively, in an instauration. This view on creative practice as cooperative (involving producers, beings of fiction, and recipients) doesn't go very well with seeing something of the camp in the novel. It seems to me that it is rather that Agamben's idea of a form-of-life – open, but impossible to empty out –, if combined with the idea of beings of fiction as agents involved in an instauration, helps to contradict this notion of an author scripting (to borrow an expression from de Boever) a quasi-encamped character's life. In other words, it is not only that the (lives of the) individuals in a story express the author's law, the author's law also expresses (the lives of) the individuals, and *this* is the reason why everything about those individuals and their stories is potentially significant.

Still, the suggestion that de Boever works his way toward through a reading of Agamben actually supports what I have been suggesting regarding fictional opportunities for keeping ourselves company. De Boever suggests that part of the solution might lie in developing an "art of living," a form of living that pre-empts a "bare life, where life has become separated from art and one is attempting to demonstrate the

worth of one's life through something that is exterior to it" (83–4). For forms-of-life, being-otherwise becomes an inalienable trait of the individual which is 'just so,' which sets against any bare life trying to prove its value through something exterior the practice of a transformation that is always genuine. Isn't something of this kind made to count when Whale's Mary Shelley asks us to "imagine ourselves" standing as witness to the creature's demise in the burning mill? Frankenstein's creature, certainly, in its long career and throughout its countless transformations in Western culture, is never itself and yet is never anything but itself – is never the essential, true, and proper Monster and yet is always true to the monster as which it is fabricated in any given incarnation. There are no 'true' and 'less true' versions of it – unless one wants to establish a hierarchy of authority from Shelley's novel to whatever the latest adaptation happens to be. And yet, not every fictional creature can, at random, achieve consistency and presence – as Latour would put it, "hold together" (*Inquiry* 245) – as Frankenstein's creature.<sup>15</sup> There is a right and wrong in this, and yet it's not the right and wrong of truth judgements. It is a right and wrong of making, of transformation, of passage.

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15 This play of, not only strangeness in the familiar but also, importantly, the familiar in the strange might ultimately even help make sense of the monster's various commodifications into cuteness: however monstrous, it is never *quite* a stranger to us.