Part Three: Company

"What does it mean," Judith Butler asks in her essays on the *Senses of the Subject*, "to require what breaks you?" (9). *Frankenstein* presents this question in novel (filmic, theatrical, …) form. It asks for the fault lines and connections between single beings and their surroundings not only in terms of plot, but also in terms of fictional production and existence. The first problem in the *Frankenstein* story might be the body, but following hard on its heels is the problem of social life. Or rather, both problems condition each other: for Frankenstein's creature, finding a companion wouldn't be so much of a problem if one weren't hideous, and being hideous wouldn't be so much of a problem if one had a companion to alleviate the loneliness. Being yourself, being by yourself, and being with others seem equally complicated. Many protagonists of the *Frankenstein* complex (be they authors, readers, characters, or texts) seem to struggle with the assumption, appropriation or inhibition of 'identities' which come to figure, mostly, as that which is *not* available, which is reductive, too large, or generally inadequate. 'Identity' as a regime of self-equivalence becomes troubled, so much so that everybody comes to be only the difference from what they not quite are: a *muted* female subject (Angela Wright), a troubled author trying to figure out how to write herself into *inherited* traditions (as Gilbert and Gubar argue), a "*collective* and *artificial* creature" in an "ambivalent, dialectical relationship" to its maker like wage-labour is to capital (Moretti 85); a young scientist literally *possessed* by an ambition that catapults him out of his proper circumstances (Victor), a *reluctant* fiancé (also Victor), a *never-quite* wife (Elizabeth), an *alleged* criminal (Justine), and so on – including, of course, the creature,

eternal outcast that he is. And further, the texts of the *Frankenstein* complex get to be called "inferior sequels," "diminishing returns," "threadbare" interpretations, "sketch[es] of the novel," "baroque exercise[s]," "atmospheric rendering[s]," "affectionate homage[s]," "semblance[s] of former glory," and "simulacric vision[s]" (Dixon 509–19).

The *Frankenstein* complex thus complicates what it means to be (an) individual. Its protagonists are as unable to stand alone, self-sufficient in their autonomous identities, as they are unable to seamlessly insert themselves into the community at hand. In most *Frankenstein* stories, communal existence is a veritable *pharmakon*, figuring sometimes as obstacle or 'poison,' and sometimes as remedy.[3] This double value is mirrored on a more global, extradiegetic level: where the *Frankenstein* story itself tells about a lonely sufferer, this lonely sufferer in turn requires our, the audience's, solidarity and attention – our suffering-with this isolated being – so that the story persists as a work of fiction and even makes it into a long-lasting pop-cultural phenomenon. 'Being yourself' is complicated for everyone and everything involved: for the creature, for its primary author, for its adaptations and variations and last but not least, for its audience. Where, for instance, the creature is generally coded as biological problem inserted into the social fabric – and thus, automatically, as social problem inserted into the biological fabric – the story as a whole has in turn often been investigated as a paradigm case of female authorship, situated uneasily in a context of male discursive agency.

If stories are collaborative practices, resulting from shared efforts between authors, audiences, and beings of fiction, then the struggles

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3   The problem is not new – Bill Hughes puts it in its literary-historical context: "the figure of Romantic solitude is frequently rendered as unhealthy in [...] related texts [by Percy Shelley and John Polidori]. Romantic monsters, without Promethean emancipation, are asocial, 'self-consumed', exhibiting an atomised individualism" (10). He elaborates on the tensions between Enlightenment principles of social reason and Romantic inwardness and the importance of dialogue as principle and genre. An "ideal of qualified individualism [...] hovers behind *Frankenstein*," he says (10). The novel "envisages [...] a way of life that is communal while critiquing a narrow sense of individual interest" (13). There is, in Shelley, "an affirmation of a radical sociability" (14).

that for instance the monster finds himself in are not simply subject to a conscious matching between protagonists and audiences, where audiences recognise their own circumstances in those of the creature (or Victor, or Elizabeth, or Mary Shelley, for that matter). Rather, these struggles must be understood more fundamentally as a shared existential situation. Communal existence and practice is the ultimate 'point' of *Frankenstein*, and of its fictional practice, in a specific, somewhat paradoxical sense: *Frankenstein* is all about the problem of community insofar as community is about the question of how separate beings can be together; and it is all about the individual insofar as the individual finds itself confronted with the question of how fundamentally entangled beings can become autonomous. In many ways, then, *Frankenstein* is all about the process of individuation – which is inevitably an individuation-in and an individuation-from one's surroundings, and thus both a solitary as well as a communal affair.

Vulnerabilities emerge along all kinds of sutures in this constellation: the suture between organism and person, so impressively visible on the creature's body, but also in the contact zones between the creature and its fellow protagonists as well as in the spheres of encounter between these beings of fiction and their readers and viewers.[4] Individuation is a material-*and*-ethical affair in and for *Frankenstein*. In the context of such vulnerabilities, self and relation reveal themselves to be both opposed and indissolubly tied to each other – "it is not just," as Butler phrases it, "that this or that body is bound up in a network of relations, but that the body, despite its clear boundaries, or perhaps by virtue of those boundaries, is defined by the relations that make its own life and action possible" (*Assembly* 130). Community, vulnerability, and individual agency thus traverse and condition each other, and bodies play an important, maybe even a primary part in this, as they reveal the interrelations between politics and intimacy.

The creature's body becomes the material-semiotic site for the negotiation of both vulnerability and freedom as dimensions of individ-

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4   I borrow the person/organism terminology from Tim Ingold.

ual agency.[5] *Frankenstein* dramatises the tragic failure of ideals of self-reliance and self-sufficiency and highlights the difficulty of making singularity count for individual beings trying to express themselves without resorting to the language and logic of 'identity.' And yet it doesn't exhaust itself in depicting the failure of such politics of self. Rather, vulnerability and isolation acquire a double value for *Frankenstein* as story and thus as collaborative practice: what isolates the creature from its fellow protagonists is precisely what makes its audience follow its narrative. The *Frankenstein* complex thus highlights that bound up with the question of what individuality beyond identity might be are complex question of self-expression, agency and freedom on the one, and of obligation, vulnerability and restraint on the other hand; and further, that stories are practices of a curiously constraint freedom, or free constraint. As he struggles for both companionship and self-assertion, the creature engages his audiences in their respective capacities for being wounded, and for being free. This is what this section is going to examine: how *Frankenstein* asks for relational ways of being oneself, and more specifically, for relational ways of being oneself in the practice of narrative fiction. All forms of being-*with*, unavoidable and constitutive as they are, still, and crucially, entail forms of being-*such*.[6] It is due to these contradictory dynamics that fiction turns out to be an intimate practice, if intimacy (as Giorgio Agamben suggests) is a form of close connection that nonetheless preserves strangeness – a non-appropriative communal experience.

 This section discusses two *Frankenstein* stories which demonstrate the failure of identity politics and two versions which, through their aesthetic strategies, instantiate a relational politics based on intimacy and

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5   I borrow the term material-semiotic from Donna Haraway's work, as it turns up for instance in her *Staying with the Trouble*.

6   Haraway, advocating the end of "bounded individualism," makes an extended case for the centrality of "being-with" as factor for any ontology and politics that do our ecological entanglements justice (see *Staying with the Trouble*, in particular the chapter "Tentacular Thinking").

vulnerability, and are more successful at establishing community without appropriation. Feminist theory in general has brought forth sharp critiques of notions of identity as transparent and stable, as literally 'self-identical'; and not surprisingly, feminist readings of *Frankenstein* focus on those very same issues.[7] For obvious reasons: many versions of *Frankenstein* quite explicitly set struggles of personal essence versus singular occurrence in the context of patriarchal conventions. In Bernard Rose's film, the debate concerning personhood and the claim to inviolable essences is framed as a debate between 'father' and 'son' – a debate without a solution; the film's brutal bleakness leaves little hope for alternative relational patterns. Nonetheless, the creature in Rose's film does try to insist – though hardly successfully – on a more entangled understanding of singular being. This entangled singularity is unfolded quite vividly Danny Boyle's 2011 staging of Nick Dear's stage play *Frankenstein*, and reveals itself as direct source of aesthetic production (rather than 'only' as interesting topic for discussion). For Boyle's staging, the two main actors alternate roles as Victor Frankenstein and his creature, a strategy of double casting that manifests, demonstrates intra- and extradiegetically, how the sphere of corporeal performance

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7   It is worth mentioning, in this context, that readings of Shelley's *Frankenstein* which treat it in its connection to Enlightenment political philosophy make a point of bringing up the problematic exclusion of women in that context, and link it explicitly to the struggle between individual and social existence. Diana Reese suggests Rousseau's and Kant's works as useful intertexts for Shelley's novel, because "existence and perpetuation of the social group (that is, the elided 'facts' of both Kant's imperative and Rousseau's contract) haunt Geneva in the form of the monster's irrepressible demand" and "Victor Frankenstein can hear the justice of the monster's claim (as an ideal citizen) but cannot grant him the corollary rights of man" (64). Similarly, Zoe Beenstock claims that Frankenstein presents a "dark allegory of Rousseau's social contract theory" (406) at a "watershed moment in the intertwined development of individualist social theory and Romantic literary form" (419). Both Reese and Beenstock emphasise how much of the critical potential of Shelley's novel when it comes to models of society hinges on the included-excluded (created-aborted) female (monster), whose problematic status reveals that a satisfactory reconciliation between the individual and the social, or the singular and the general, remains pending.

and with it, the sphere of individual agency, exceed the limits of the individual body.

However, feminist criticism of Frankenstein has itself occasionally neglected such entanglements and resorted to a rather essentialising notion of individual 'identity'; a shortcoming that plays itself out in novel form in Theodore Roszak's 1995 *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein*. Roszak's novel ostensibly aims at revealing an alternative precisely to patriarchally conditioned identity. Its failure to do this in any convincing form, however, only serves to highlight the futility of exchanging one identity for another in terms of privilege, while never questioning the regime of identity itself. It is not least the communicative tactics of narrative fiction that can indicate a solution to this impasse. Whale's film *Bride of Frankenstein*, like Boyle's stage version, employs a method of double casting that allows to translate the estrangement of the (female) subject – lamented for good reason, but ineffectively attacked in certain forms of feminist criticism – into a constitutive strangeness that is equally the individual's bane, and the individual's liberation. In *Bride of Frankenstein*, the actress playing Mary Shelley in the frame story reappears as the creature's intended bride in the main body of the film. Not only do these metaleptic shifts (of Mary Shelley 'into' her own story or, depending on one's viewpoint, her creature's 'out' of it) reveal how the positions of authors and recipients are relationally and cooperatively produced. This specific instance of double casting also raises the question of whether the self-estrangement that feminist criticism has examined as a painful consequence of power relations also has another aspect to it, that is, whether this estrangement also allows, precisely in the form of narrative fiction, a form of keeping ourselves company that transcends the opposition of community and isolation.

The vulnerabilities and alterations that a politics of identity tries to avoid may actually turn out to be productive sources not only of community and relation, but also self-relation and intimacy. The double casts in Boyle's stage and Whale's film version, in particular, not only debate the question of entangled individualities but put those entanglements to use quite insistently in their methods of aesthetic production. They thus reveal how discursive negotiations of community, *in* fiction, are them-

selves, *as* fiction, based in participatory practice – which means, also, that the ethical questions of which *Frankenstein* speaks are at the same time inscribed in its very ontology as a work of fiction.