

Getting Dirty with the Body: Abjection in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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This paper argues that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* upsets the tradition of anatomy, according to which scientific knowledge is inscribed upon the body and the sanitized corpse is transformed into a text. Shelley's novel decorporealizes its characters and subordinates them to a hygienic selfhood, merely in order to draw them back to stark corporeality as corpses. The assemblage of incongruous bodily parts onto the monster's hideous form mocks the human attempt to cleanse the self from its unbearable fleshiness, while the monster's obscene gaze falling into our inner reality speaks to the mysterious fears of our nature. It is a fear of our own inherent abjection, the anxiety that a living being is always too close to death not to get dirty with it.

It is hard to make sense of *Frankenstein* outside of the parameters of René Descartes' vision of nature as that which Drew Leder has called "a plenum of passive matter driven by mechanical forces" (119), for both Frankenstein's physical chemistry and Mary Shelley's sudden flash of inspiration converge on it. A paradigm of Cartesian thought, Shelley's novel is as "profoundly shaped by the figure of the dead body" (Leder 120), as Cartesian metaphysics itself. Indeed, not only is *Frankenstein* an "offspring" of the culture of dissection, but the concentric tales which make up its narrative structure cluster around the tale told by a "dead" body, itself the assemblage of random bits of wasted flesh from heterogeneous corpses. The reader of Mary Shelley is warned upon entering her novel that he will have "to dabble in dirt" (Shelley 307) and come to grips with the hideous idea of the abject, outside of which no account given for the hellish countenance and soul (482) of Frankenstein's creature can be adequate. As I shall be arguing, the reader's identification with the monster's alternative version of the story is effected with subtlety, as if monstrosity creeps into us *unseen* and infects us.

An early modern Rembrandt portrayal of the dissective process, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (dating back to 1632), helps to set the scene for Mary Shelley's novel. Francis Barker's observation in *The Tremulous*



Private Body that “no eye within the painting sees the body” (77) sharpens our awareness that the otherwise intense gaze of the onlookers in the Rembrandt painting is paradoxically averted from the displayed corpse, which, nevertheless, is supposed to be the focal point of this “furious concentration of intellect,” as Jonathan Sawday remarks (152). Barker comments on the celebrated gaze of science arguing that “the perspective of natural philosophy, may be organized around the corpse, but in order not to see it” (77). This “invisibility” of the dead body in Tulp’s anatomy lesson seems to imply that the novel science of anatomy, in getting to know too much about “the *physical* secrets of the world” (Shelley 296), almost forgets the physically irrefutable presence of the body. The other-worldly presence of the anatomized body is purposefully obscured under a bundle of meanings invested in it. Like any sample of the profane and pathologized, the dead body, by juxtaposition with the erect living forms around the cadaver, becomes a spectacle and a positive signifier of the new order, of their glowing health and their glowing intellect. The intellect of the rising bourgeoisie has triumphed over the body’s deadly materiality; put in Sawday’s terms, their order has “subjugated the mortal body to the immortal nexus of the civic bonds which unite them” (152).

Frankenstein, on the other hand, presents the reader with a body, not in the least absent, but overwhelmingly present at a threatening excess. The re-animated corpse in *Frankenstein* is more than *seen*; it cries for attention. Its story is placed

prominent in the novel's structure and its form possesses our "mental vision" (Shelley 263). Everything about it comes at an excess: its strength, its grotesque size, its viability, its sheer hideousness, its unruly passions. I would suggest that Shelley's text dramatizes a ghastly return to the visible corpse and enacts the recovery of what Barker has called the "lost bodiliness" (81). It is noteworthy that the newly-established "surgical regime of the body" (Barker 74), a moment of which is captured in the afore-mentioned painting, would so overlook the corpse's stark bodiliness and focus on an impoverished version of the flesh as pure meaning with no physical bearer. It seems, however, that, if the culture of dissection elevated the dead body into a meaningful text, or a bundle of signs, it was, Sawday explains, "as part of [the] struggle against 'infamy' or the *taint* of the gallows" (151) that the flesh, forced into the Symbolic order of experience, was made to lose its fleshliness. Mary Shelley upsets this reordering of body-vision the culture of anatomy had effected; she manipulates the existing scientific knowledge and, running counter to *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*,¹ not only does she refrain from textualizing the corpse, but rather corporealizes the text. For what else is *Frankenstein* if not the coarse embodiment, in flesh and blood, of what had always been the utmost fear of the self?

In calling the dead body back to our field of vision, Shelley works *against* such a sanitized view of the corpse and *for* the taint of brute materiality she plunges her reader into. That her text substitutes Frankenstein's "workshop of filthy creation" (Shelley 315) for the public setting of Tulp's anatomy lesson can be very telling. The body in *Frankenstein* is not the "public body" (Barker 73) that the culture of dissection put on festive display; it is not placed under the inquiring gaze of science in a well-ordered, well-lit dissection theatre, open to the public eye. Confined in his "solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments" (Shelley 315)—more of a hiding-place than a proper scientific laboratory—Victor proceeds with his "midnight labours" (314), under the piercing gaze of the moon, in a nearly masturbatory pleasure. His workshop is a "sick room" (324) where death, rotteness, and "cold horror" (Griffin 61) reside; it is dark and watery, just as the image of an infecting womb conflated with that of a charnel-house. What I am saying here is that the corpse inside the laboratory is the condition of the scientist's ability to reproduce life, but when expelled from Tulp's anatomy theatre and inserted into the novel, this mass of assembled remnants ceases to be a sanitized "core of useful meaning" (Barker 78) and becomes the waste phenomenon Kristeva has described as "a piece of filth" (2), contaminating for

1. Barker is against the oversimplification of the painting to a mere "substitution of text for body" (81), as he considers both text and body much too ambivalent to respond to this pattern.

the living and equivalent to decay, an excrement of science, “an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on” (Shelley 495).

Nevertheless, the threat posed by the perishability of the corpse averts neither the protagonist nor the reader. The latter is similarly enticed into taking a trip down to the “vaults and charnel-houses” (Shelley 312) that are, to the young scientist, sites both of fascination and peril. To look for the principle of animation in the body’s own mechanical processes, Victor needs to have access to “the natural decay and corruption of [it]” (311); in Susan Bordo’s words, he needs to *get dirty* with the body (91). To get to the core of Mary Shelley’s unhallowed project, the reader also has to get dirty with the body. Unlike the philosophical tale, which, to use Mary Favret’s phrasing, poses “as an out-of-body experience” (54), the readers’ experience of *Frankenstein* draws them down to their own material existence; it is a novel the mind does not take in before it is registered upon our body and literally “proved upon our pulses” (53) by way of an uncontrollable gagging sensation. The sickly sight of a composite corpse brought back to life shakes everyone with disgust simply because it is the materialization of a border-line condition, so undecidably both of life and of death, a “border that has encroached upon everything,” as Kristeva has stated (3). Even more disruptively, the reader of *Frankenstein* is implicated in a process of inverted identification with Victor Frankenstein: he is drawn to the discovery of life inherent in death by violating dead matter and anatomizing corpses, whereas the reader in anatomizing the novel, discovers the spark of deadliness inherent in all forms of the living. Strikingly seated at the core of the novel, like some “monstrous” foetus,² the monster’s tale suggests the idea of death lurking underneath the sanitized coating of the novel. It is death snuggling into “the cradle of life” (Shelley 263), a womb as sickly as a tomb of “unhallowed damps” (315), that guides the reader of Mary Shelley to the terrifying realization that the proceeding from death to animation is no more loathesome than its reverse.

It seems to me that if the creature upon which Victor bestows existence has been registered in the popular imagination as “monstrous” – or are we “monstrously” attracted to it? – it is primarily because it evokes the never fully worked out idea of the body as wasted and *abjected*. As we have already discussed, the corpse “seen without God and outside of science” (Kristeva 4) is made to stand for what Barker describes as “the terror of that abandoned materiality” (76), death infecting life, “the utmost of abjection” (Kristeva 4); but the abjection

2. The issue of “layering” (Jordanova 57) the novel is consonant with the scientific “peeling off of layer after layer of organic tissue” (56) meant “to render visible the emblematic core” (57) of the dissected body. In the novel the reader has to work through layers of narrative tissue to “[approach] the origins of life” (57) and discover the deadly “foetus” seated in there.

inherent in Victor's creation rests further in the fact that "death, which, in any case, kills [us], interferes with what, in [our] living universe, is supposed to save [us] from death: childhood, science" (4). The corpse of little William, formerly *blooming and active in health*, now seen "stretched on the grass livid and motionless" (Shelley 334), gives flesh to man's greatest anxiety. In Frankenstein's monstrous world, even the bodies of beautiful women, in their bloom of youth, are caused to disintegrate into worm-eaten corpses. In Victor's dream, signs of decay on the body of his beloved Elisabeth start to show as a grim reminder of mutability in nature, when, to his horror, we read in the text, "her features [appear] to change ... and [he] [sees] the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel" (319). Victor—no more than Walton or Shelley's reader—is paralyzed; his sterilized world "has erased its borders" and he "behold[s] [its] breaking down" (Kristeva 4).³ The pattern is reversed: the sequence of "[t]o execute, to dismember, to eat" (Barker 73), which described the dissection process, gives way to the ghastly image of the formerly dismembered body assembling its scattered items and torn pieces of flesh to "devour" humans. Actually, Shelley can be seen both to admit and resist the disturbing corporeality she brings to the foreground and at moments to move the reader out of the realm of the body only to shake us with fear of an even more violent return to it.

I see two processes at work in the novel: the text decorporealizes almost every figure, subordinating them to a hygienic and "proper" selfhood—like Walton's "refined [...] character" (Shelley 274), only in order to draw them back to stark corporeality as corpses. It is the very bodiliness of the corpses of so many dear friends—William, Justine, Clerval, Elisabeth—that aligns them with the filthy demon. Once touched on by the gaze of the unseen monster, they are all made "to pass the awful boundary between life and death" (351), like *he* did but in the reverse direction. Justine is tainted by his infecting "monsterism" and ends up "gazed on and execrated by thousands" (344) who cannot tell an innocent girl from a *monstrous* murderer. Generally, the bodies of all dead subjects in *Frankenstein* instantly enter what Kearns calls "the realm of the objectified" (125)⁴ which

3. In Shelley's conceptualization of the abject, the opposition between the clean and the unclean draws on the distinction between Frankenstein's *inside* and *outside* world. Colleen Hobbs has argued that it is "by insulating itself from the disruptive outside world" (156) that the bourgeois unit of the Frankenstein family maintains its condition of "cleanliness" and Kate Ellis agrees that the members of the family *wall* domestic affection "in considerable seclusion" (Shelley 295) for the sake of maintaining tranquility (Ellis 137-38) within their immunized as much as immunizing family-circle.

4. Even Victor is tinged with object-like qualities; Walton perceives of the two figures in the chase-scene as interchangeable: "If any new *object* should appear in sight" (Shelley 282, my italics) and towards the end of the novel Victor feels himself to be "a

immediately reduces them to corporeal matter. Kearns notices that the itemized picture of Elizabeth's dead body, transposed as it is from the position of a blooming maid to that of an alienated *thing* with "pale and distorted features," hair hanging loose, "bloodless arms and relaxed form" (Shelley 467) — all parts but no whole — is a moment reminiscent of the "remains of the half-finished creature [...] [lying] scattered on the floor" (440) in the beginning of the story.

There is little else to account for the monster's "monstrosity" other than its being constantly on the edge of turning into a full subject within the Symbolic, yet always violently kicked out of it. Critics agree that there has been "no more articulate, no more thoughtful, no better-read monster anywhere than in *Frankenstein* ... reasonable in his argumentative strategies" (Kearns 136), enlightened and just. But it is not the speaking monster that scares us; language makes the reader, as Shelley herself writes, "overlook the deformity of [its] figure" (Shelley 379). It is the gazing monster that is extremely unpleasant for the reader, simply because it defines the condition of our own monstrosity. The corpse that started out as a horrid spectacle "in a phallic field of vision," as Peter Brooks calls it (199), or, as the text writes, "a *thing*" (Shelley 319) stretched out at the feet of his creator, turns into a seeing subject in that very field. There is a profound uncanniness in hearing a "corpse" saying: "I gazed on my victim" (410), "I fixed my eyes on the child" (410), "I gazed with delight" (410), "I shall watch [...]" (416). The decisive turn from the pathetic to the monstrous takes place when the "dull yellow eye of the creature open[s]" (318) but bears nothing of "the brightness of a beloved eye" (303); instead, it is daemoniacally yellow. The acquisition of a gaze signals the subjectivization of the formerly impossible object of our fancy. Thus, the gazing body in the text can be said to effect an ominous reversal of *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*, where the eyes of the mute object on the cadaver are safely kept obscured in the shadow. The gaze of Frankenstein's "corpse," however, protected from the incisive gaze of science, is turned onto humans, abuses and penetrates us, but primarily the scientist who created him. Shelley crafts the most dreadful scopic scene in the novel to include an unseen monster and a petrified Frankenstein. She writes: he — on whom "I had gazed ... while unfinished" (319) — now himself unseen "held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, *were fixed on me*" (319).

Through the very framing of the novel, as he is "reading inward from the

blasted tree [...] a miserable spectacle" (429) or "a restless spectre" (439) reduced to the condition of "looked-at-ness." This interchangeability of the human with the monstrous figure makes it difficult to tell the subject from the object, unless, as Katherine Kearns notes, "they are dressed up for work" (117).

outermost frame,” to quote Brooks (214), the reader finds his obsessive gaze identified with the monster’s. As Slavoj Žižek says in his discussion of the pervert, echoing Lacan, one could claim that there is something extremely disturbing, almost “obscene, in this experience of our gaze as already the gaze of” (108) a filthy daemon; it has to do with the stirring realization that, while gazing at the object, the object was always already returning the gaze, and from a point where it could be unseen (109). It is no longer the gazed-at monster but rather a filthy mass that moves and talks and *gazes* back. What terrified Mary Shelley now terrifies others. A daemonical eye with penetrative capacity effectively reduces the readers to paralyzed objects; its obscene gaze falling onto our inner reality turns our body inside out and, as the text says, “speak[s] to the mysterious fears of our nature” (Shelley 262). Shelley has set up a trap for her readers: the “uncanny aversion of the ... gaze” (Barker 81) in the Rembrandt painting is an aversion from our own inherent abjection. *I, the paralyzed reader, am awfully abjected*. The text has eyes which gaze intently into me from “a small and almost imperceptible chink” (Shelley 373) that totally escapes my view; it is a hideous “body” that is less read by than reading others.

The assemblage of incongruous bodily parts onto the monster’s hideous form mocks the human attempt to free the world from decay and to cleanse the self from its unbearable corporeality. The monster cannot get rid of its corporeal existence. Mary Poovey claims that its “physical form literally embodies its essence” (128) and, indeed, the monster is what it is by way of its yellow, watery eyes, or by way of its body, which, in being far from clean and proper, can never be fully symbolic; it is a body that will always “bear [the guilty] trace of its debt to nature” (Kristeva 102). Likewise, Shelley is, as *she* suggests, “the author of unalterable evils” (Shelley 355) by way of “bind[ing] [her novel] to the flesh” (Favret 55). *Frankenstein* inevitably bears the trace of its debt to the dead body. Victor’s manifest enthusiasm at the scientific discovery that a corpse is always too close to life is translated in the latent content of the novel into the human anxiety that a living being is always too close to death not to *get dirty* with it.

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