Monstrous vision

Autor(en): **Lawder, Bruce**

Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **8 (1995)**

PDF erstellt am: **25.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99919

Monstrous Vision

Bruce Lawder

William Wordsworth once wrote that "We murder to dissect." The romantic poet of "The Tables Turned" would seem to identify critical analysis, reading itself, with the monstrous image of dismemberment. But a writer might try to alter, if not defer, the deadly process Wordsworth read into words about words by literally digging up the dead – I'm thinking of the texts that make up the corpus of literature – and stitching them together or "re-membering" them.

We can begin by leaving paradise. These are Milton's words at the end of "Paradise Lost":

> The World was all before them, where to choose
> (Book XII, 646)

This is a line that William Wordsworth found important enough to re-write at the beginning of his great poem, "The Prelude":

> The earth is all before me – with a heart
> (Book I, 14, 1805 version)

an act of re-writing that he preserved in the 1850 version of the poem with only a slight change of punctuation. One notices at once however Wordsworth's substitutions:

1) the "earth" for the "World"
2) the present for the past tense of the verb,
3) the first person singular "me" for the third person plural "them,"

as well as the replacement of the mind's strictly localized "where to choose" through the avowedly joyous "with a heart." In Wordsworth's reversal of Milton, "nature" or "the earth" is presented in opposition to "the hell" or "prison" of the city and, in opposition to the inevitable "fall" into the

"World" through sin, would seem to offer the poet/person on earth the possibility of a kind of paradise regained through the singular act of present imagination.

Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* and Walt Whitman in "Song of the Open Road" both re-write the same line(s). When Mary Shelley's "monster," his hopes of a humane life among human beings destroyed, flees the De Lacey's rented cottage, he says:

> And now, with the world before me, whither
> should I bend my steps? (180)

We find traces of the same textual moment(s) in the second line of Whitman's famous poem:

> Healthy, free, the world before me,

This seems to me an interesting coincidence, and what I want to do in the following pages is to look at these two texts in terms of the vision(s) of literature revealed or concealed through such acts of revision.

I

In *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley creates, or re-creates, the story of a creation, or re-creation. Victor Frankenstein, a young Swiss scientist from Geneva, succeeds in animating fragments of corpses he himself has dismembered and "re-membered" and thus in creating a new being. But the "work" of the "author," to use words from the novel, is a "monster" from which the parenting "author" flees, a nameless "creature" that in the course of the book receives a series of epithets but never a proper name.

The book itself however is a kind of animation, or re-animation, of fragments, or texts, from the corpus of literature and can be read as an imaging of, and a commentary on, its own creation. In fact, it would be difficult to find a more literary novel in English before the 20th century or one that displays so openly its own literariness.

After the failure of his attempts to live humanely among human beings, for example, the "creature" flees the cottage with the words I quoted:

> And now, with the world before me, whither
> should I bend my steps? (180)

As I said, this is a re-writing of Milton's line,

> The World was all before them, where to choose

which Wordsworth had re-written in "The Prelude," not published until 1850:

> The earth is all before me – with a heart

Mary Shelley's "creature" however does not flee into the romantic poet's possible present "paradise" on "earth." Nor does he enter as lover Milton's post-lapsarian "World." Mary Shelley's "creature" goes not only from the hopeful "hovel" and "fields" of "paradise" into "the world" conceived of and gradually internalized as "hell," but also out of the "paradise" of poetry into the hellish world of prose. Language itself loses its measure.

"Paradise Lost" is one of the three books the "monster" has read, indeed read it "as a true history" (171); he is aware of his Miltonic range of reference. When he first confronts Victor on the Mer de Glace, he says:

> Remember, that I am thy creature, I ought
> to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen
> angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no
> misdeed. (142)

Later in the book, though earlier in the fictive narrated time, he develops the comparison only to reject it:

> Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; [...] but [...] Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and abhorred. (171-2)

In his loneliness he wants Victor to create for him his own Eve, "a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself [...] we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another" (187). Victor promises to perform the deed, but breaks his word and tears up "the thing on which I was engaged" (207).

From this "tearing up" – similar to the tearing up of a manuscript, it is however the tearing up of their own "contrat social" – Victor ceases to be the "author." It is not only that the created "creature" escapes his creator, he also takes over the authority for the story and becomes the creator of a Victor/victim created, or re-created, in his own image. The created character also takes over the authorship of the book. The former and now vengeful "author" must now follow the script of his character and becomes the disfigured figure of his own disfiguring creation. What Victor finds in the ice of the North is "the print of his huge step on the white plain" (243). The "new" writing is *literally* inscribed *in nature* for the old "author":

> Sometimes, indeed, he left marks in writing on the barks of the trees or cut in stone that guided me and instigated my fury. (244)

What does the writing say? Among other things: "My reign is not yet over" (244).

It is the created character that writes the fate of his creator, here the end, but not the end of the writing, for the created character survives his "author." "My work is nearly complete," he says on the next-to-last page, before withdrawing from the words of the book, as a work is withdrawn from its author, "lost in darkness and distance" (261).

2

The book as a written text is subordinated to or incorporated in a fiction of writing. It consists of a series of letters by Captain Walton to his sister, Mrs. Margaret Saville, in England. In these letters Walton relates his own story, folding into it the dying Victor's first-person narrative, in which is embedded, as a direct quotation, the monster's own monstrous tale. There is thus a triple, if indeed not a quadruple, fictive structure: 1) the monster's (retold) tale, quoted by Victor to Walton, 2) Victor's own narrative, which Walton himself transcribes, in which the monster's tale is embedded, and which Victor on his deathbed edits and corrects ("'Since you have preserved my narration,' said he, 'I would not that a mutilated one should go down to posterity.'" 249), 3) Walton's own letters to his sister, and, in addition, 4) this fragmentary corpus of broken off textual moments reconstituted or reanimated by the (fictive) reader. I shall come back to the reader later.

The letters all bear the date 17--. The erasure of its own dates permits the book to erase certain dates in history and thus history itself. The book

however also erases its own dates by gradually shifting the time of the fictive written text(s) into the time of the actual writing. For the fictive characters, presumably living before the French Revolution, themselves quote "romantic" poems, not only Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," both of which appeared in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, but also two poems written or published in 1816, when Mary Shelley was writing *Frankenstein* in Cologny: Canto III of Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," which Mary Shelley was transcribing for the poet, as well as Percy Shelley's "Mutability." What the "realistic" and plot-centered (or de-centered) reader might here regard as a mistake allows the author to refer the story to the poets just mentioned and thus to write one of the first criticisms of them before they had even finished writing their own work.

In Victor Frankenstein we can see an image of the romantic poet. He bears a certain resemblance to the aging Coleridge, for example, but also to Mary's future husband. He has Shelley's eyes, "fine and lovely" (248), but also often expressive "of wildness" (71); he shares his eloquence and love of literature. He shares his love of boats, too, of reclining for hours on end on their planks observing the heavens. He has his interest in chemistry and in the scientific experiments of Erasmus Darwin and Humphry Davy; as well as his belief in the regenerative powers of nature. He even bears his name, for "Victor" was Shelley's childhood nickname and the name with which he signed his first poems. But most of all he shares Shelley's ambition to improve or reform the world, "the Shelleyan idea," as critics say today.

This "passion for reforming the world," to use the phrase that Shelley used of himself in his preface to "Prometheus Unbound" (207), the play he began in the autumn of 1818, the same year in which *Frankenstein* was published, Mary Shelley saw in her 1839 Note to the play as based on the idea that "man could be so perfectionized as to be able to expel evil from his own nature, and from the greater part of the creation" (271). She adds: "He followed certain classical authorities in figuring Saturn as the good principle, Jupiter the usurping evil one, and Prometheus as the regenerator, who, unable to bring mankind back to primitive innocence, used knowledge as a weapon to defeat evil, by leading mankind, beyond the state wherein they are sinless through ignorance, to that in which they are virtuous through wisdom" (271-2).

In *Frankenstein* it is precisely this use of "knowledge as a weapon" that goes wrong. For if we follow the metaphors of scientific investigation and research, what we find along with the familiar topos of (Mother) Nature is a

series of images of unclothing culminating in something like a public rape. This is how Victor describes his attitude toward "the world" as a child:

> The world was to me a secret which I desired to divine. Curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature, gladness akin to rapture, as they were unfolded to me, are among the earliest sensations I can remember. (81)

As a scientist, he sees his work as a "penetration" of "the secrets of nature":

> I have described myself as always having been imbued with a fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature. [...] The most learned philosopher [...] had partially unveiled the face of Nature, but her immortal lineaments were still a wonder and a mystery. [...] I had gazed upon the fortifications and impediments that seemed to keep human beings from entering the citadel. [...] But here were books, and here were men who had penetrated deeper and knew more. (84)

Later Professor Waldmann, his mentor at the University of Ingolstadt, takes over the metaphor and thrusts it to a monstrous spectacle: "They [the scientists] penetrate into the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding-places" (92). When Victor hears these words, he thinks: "I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" (92).

If we see in Victor the scientist a figure of the artist, we have to read the book as a criticism of such a figure. It is not only that Victor's "creation" fails, or that he lacks the imaginative power to "see" in advance the consequences of his "work." Victor can not read. When he speaks of the "unparalleled barbarity" of the "monster," for example, he overlooks the (literary) parallels of his own (con)text, for the "barbarities" of the "monster" mirror those of the people in the book, including those of Victor. When the monster warns him, "I shall be with you on your wedding night" (209), the self-referential Victor refers the words to himself and thus misses their actual meaning: not he but Elizabeth, his "Eve," will have to die as sacrificial victim of revenge.

The book as a criticism of what one might call "creative" arrogance, or hybris, can also be read in its use of the Prometheus myth. The allusion to Prometheus appears as early as the title page:

Frankenstein;
or
The Modern Prometheus.

This is followed by a quotation from Milton's "Paradise Lost":

> Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
> To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
> From darkness to promote me? -

In his 1819 preface to "Prometheus Unbound," Percy Shelley would collocate the same two texts:

> The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus, is Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgement, a more poetical character than Satan, because, in addition to courage and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement, which, in the Hero of *Paradise Lost*, interfere with the interest. The character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs, and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure. In the minds of those who consider that magnificent fiction with a religious feeling it engenders something worse. But Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and truest motives to the best and noblest ends. (205)

That the later Mary Shelley did not entirely share her husband's attitude toward Prometheus as revealed in his re-writing of the myth in "Prometheus Unbound" can be seen in the one adjective she gives Prometheus in her verse drama, "Proserpine," probably written in 1820, "impious Prometheus" (6).

In *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley combines the two most prominent variants of the myth, Aeschylus's version of Prometheus as the fire-giver and the later, Ovidian image of Prometheus as the creator of mankind. But in contrast to Byron's famous "heroic" poem, "Prometheus," published in 1816, as well as to Shelley's drama, "Prometheus Unbound," concluded three years later, both of which end with the same word, "victory," Mary Shelley's novel *inverts the valorisation of the protagonist*. "The modern Prometheus" becomes an anti-model, a negation of the "godly" as well as of the "human." Fire moves from the area of the helpful to that of the

destructive when the "monster" ceases to bring the De Laceys firewood in secret and instead sets fire to their cottage. But "fire" also appears literally: etymologically, it continues to burn in Victor's "ardour." It is his idealistic "fire," his "ardour" or zeal to improve the world, that eventually destroys that world and himself.

If the disfigured monster becomes the figure for the disfiguring (genius of) Victor, the book re-figures male possibility positively in the portrait of Henry Clerval. His description in the 1823 "Thomas" copy of *Frankenstein* bears an uncanny resemblance to the retrospective, idealizing portrait(s) Mary Shelley was to draw of her husband in her 1839 edition of his poems:

> Henry loved poetry and his mind was filled with the imagery and sublime sentiments of the masters of that art. A poet himself, he turned with disgust from the details of ordinary life. His own mind was all the possession that he prized, beautiful & majestic thoughts the only wealth he coveted – daring as the eagle and as free, common laws could not be applied to him; and while you gazed on him you felt his soul's spark was more divine – more truly stolen from Apollo's sacred fire, than the glimmering ember that animates other men. (Rieger, 39)

Clerval, like the "clear valley" of his name, can be read, along a Burkean spectrum, as the moral home of the "beautiful" in opposition to an increasingly demonic "sublime" located within the book in the Mer de Glace of Mont Blanc and the "mountains of ice" of the North; and Victor's struggle as (re-)presented in terms of his movement within the opposite poles of possibility figures by Clerval and the "monster." The disfiguration of Clerval through death is thus Victor's disfiguration as well: what survives for him can only be monstrous.

If the book appears to be a warning against "creative" arrogance and the pursuit of knowledge conceived of as a (male) "penetration" of the "secrets of nature," the book also presents the failure of such a warning. For at the end of the book Victor attempts to warn the now writing Walton, another ambitious male possessed by his sense of purpose, against his own purposive ambition:

> Farewell, Walton! Seek happiness in tranquility and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries. (256)

Walton, however, does not accept the advice. He wants to find a passage through the North Pole as well as to discover "the secret of the magnet." Only a mutiny, an act of force, in other words, can deter him from his goal. In his own eyes he returns home not "a sadder and a wiser man," like Coleridge's wedding guest in the "Ancient Mariner," but rather like Victor "blasted in these hopes" (256) as one with his "hopes blasted by cowardice and indecision; I come back ignorant and disappointed" (254). But Victor also fails to follow his own advice. He is the one who, shortly before his own death, attempts to encourage the mutinous mariners to continue their monstrous voyage through the ice: "Be men, or be more than men" (253).

<div align="center">3</div>

The fiction of writing in *Frankenstein* is itself part of a fiction of reading. The letters are addressed to Walton's married sister, Mrs. Margaret Saville, the repository not only of the letters – or the manuscript of the novel, in other words – but also of the posited, though never observed, values of domestic affection and happiness.

If we look at the name, Margaret Saville, we notice that the initials, MS, are not only the abbreviation for manuscript, but also the initials the author of *Frankenstein* was to acquire in the course of writing the book, though only after a series of events that are themselves "lost in darkness and distance." Moreover, one can also see in Margaret Saville's maiden name, Walton, a possible play on the name of Mary's mother, Wollstonecraft, so that Margaret's (unreported) passage from Margaret Walton to Margaret Saville enacts, or re-enacts, her author's passage from Mary Wollstonecraft (Godwin) to Mary Shelley, MW to MS.

The person destined to mark the passage from Mary Wollstonecraft (Godwin) to Mary Shelley, as well as the passage of *Frankenstein* from manuscript to book, was of course Percy Shelley. It was Percy who corrected the final proofs for the publisher, not Mary, and who also wrote the "Author's Preface" for the anonymously published 1818 edition of the book. And it was also Percy who, like Victor, but also like Rousseau, abandoned his own offspring – in Percy's case it was his two children along with their mother, his wife Harriet; and ran away with Mary.

Do the letters "arrive"? Within the text, Walton doubts that they will:

> A scene has just passed of such uncommon interest that, although it is highly probable that these papers may never reach you, yet I cannot forbear recording it. (252)

In fact, Walton the writer continually disparages the worth of writing. When he writes Margaret that "I have no friend," he adds:

> I shall commit my thoughts to paper, it is true; but that is a poor medium for the communication of feeling. (63)

(It is just after this devaluation of writing that the word "romantic" appears for the first time; it occurs three times in the letter, always as a negative or devaluing, non-literary emotional term, the positive literary term being "modern.") The editor Victor shares his "ghost writer's" or scribe's – Walton's – sense of the inadequacy of descriptive language:

> [...] I was seized by remorse and the sense of guilt, which hurried me away to a hell of intense tortures such as no language can describe. (132)

This theme of the inadequacy of descriptive language is developed throughout the book; one of its most prominent manifestations occurs in the final pages when Walton writes:

> Over him [Victor] hung a form which I cannot find words to describe [...]. (256-7)

One reason why Walton cannot find words to describe the "form" is that the "form" is itself deformed: it is the monstrous figure of the "monster," or "work," confronting its dead "author."

This deformation can be seen as both inside and outside the epistolary form that *Frankenstein* as a novel itself deforms. For what is missing in the fiction of writing and reading that is *Frankenstein* is the reader's response(s). Margaret Saville's letters we never see. Walton's letters form only a part of an exchange, or correspondence. The story of dismemberment that we read is thus itself dismembered, or fragmented, as communicative act and thus inscribed in the absence of the presence it would appear to celebrate. Milton's "solitary way" into "the World" turns out to be doubly "solitary" being singly so.

In the absence of Margaret Saville, it is the reader who in a sense purloins the letters to read them as MS. If the sender always receives from the receiver his or her own message in reverse form, then the letters always arrive at their destination, as we all know. But if MS is transformed from the imagined receiver to the actual sender, it is to suffer the monster's

originating fate, which is not so much the loss of a name as the absence of one. If however we argue that a letter does *not always* arrive at its destination, then from the moment that this possibility belongs to its structure one can say – and one has – that it never truly arrives.

This is what literary reference, among other things, tells us. There is always something missing.

II

The 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* begins with the image of a funeral. The corpse is being buried so that one can go on with the business of living. The corpse can be read as the "old" European literature and the business of living as the business of the "new" American literature.

For Whitman "the new breed of poets ... shall find their inspiration in real objects today" (727), and not, it would seem, in literature. Whitman presents his position(s) through a series of apparently binary oppositions, such as "Europe"/"America," "feudal"/"democratic," "old"/"new," offering what might seem more like "cadenzas of argumentation" – to take a phrase from John Carey's *Sunday Times* review of George Steiner's *Real Presences* – rather than arguments in a step-by-step logical procedure; in erasing the distance between the passages I am going to quote I will accelerate the presentation but at the same time necessarily distort it:

> The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir. [...] Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. (709)
>
> The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. To him the other continents arrive as contributions. [...] (711)
>
> For such the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. [...] Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted and their eras and characters be illustrated and that finish the verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative and has vista. [...] (712)
>
> Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most needs poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall. (712)

> In the make of the great masters the idea of political liberty is indispensable. Liberty takes the adherence of heroes wherever men and women exist [...] but never takes any adherence or welcome from the rest more than from poets. They are the voice and exposition of liberty. (720)

What we would seem to have here is a kind of nationalist poetics in which "the idea of political liberty" becomes "indispensable" for what Whitman elsewhere calls "a new order" of experience, the "unrhymed poetry" (710) of daily life, which demands a formal break with the old poetry: not rhyme and meter but rather what Whitman elsewhere in the preface calls "new free forms" (717):

> The poetic quality is not marshalled in rhyme or uniformity or abstract addresses to things nor in melancholy complaints or good precepts, but is the life of these and much else and is in the soul. ... read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem. [...] (714-15)

The culminating rhythm of this argument would seem to be launched by the initial sentence of the preface's final paragraph:

> The poems distilled from other poems will
>   probably pass away.

2

Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," a kind of "Invitation au voyage" or "Voyage" poem, would seem to be the work in which his apparently anti-literary attitude reaches its extreme, for it is in the 15th and final section of this poem that the "poet" or "speaker" imperatively tells the reader:

> Let the paper remain on the desk unwritten, and
>   the book on the shelf unopen'd!

Taken literally, this command would put an end to literature. The reader, reading on, rebels against the writer, just as the writer obviously did in writing his own injunction against writing. One of the problems here is that the poet has not followed his own advice: he has opened the book and put

pen to paper. Moreover, this injunction against literature happens in a poem that launches its own verbal voyage by re-writing the very literature it later wishes shelved:

> Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
> Healthy, free, the world before me,
> The long brown path before me leading wherever I
>   choose.

For the second line contains a multiple literary reference. The first reference is to one of Milton's closing lines in "Paradise Lost":

> The world was all before them, where to choose

The second is to Wordsworth's own re-writing of the line at the beginning of "The Prelude":

> The earth is all before me – with a heart

Whitman's revision, "the world before me," removes the verb from both authors, retrieves Milton's "the World" rather than Wordsworth's "the earth," but preserves Wordsworth's singular self-referential pronoun, "me," instead of Milton's more distant plural, "them." "The world before me" is neither past nor present, but apparently timeless. Milton's emphatic use of "choose" returns, and if postponed nevertheless in the same insistent end-position of the line, although as something entirely positive for Whitman, it would seem, and not as part of "Adam's (and Eve's) curse." A trace of Wordsworth's "heart" can be found in Whitman's "light-hearted." There is even in the word "afoot" a possible allusion to the kind of poetry from which Whitman here steps free, for "afoot" is itself a foot, an iamb, the basic "measure" of the iambic pentameter line of "Paradise Lost" and "The Prelude" which Whitman here "opens" into his free-verse "Song."

But there is still another possible literary reference here, though it may be a matter of literary coincidence, one that offers us another way of seeing Whitman's difference. For Whitman's phrase "the world before me" can also be read as a direct quotation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The "monster," having just burned down the De Lacey's cottage and thus destroyed what was for him the hope of "paradise," exclaims:

> And now, with *the world before me*, whither
> should I bend my steps? (180)

Like Whitman, the "monster" offers us a view of his prospects in egalitarian language:

> I resolved to fly far from the scene of my misfortunes; but to me, hated and despised, every country must be equally horrible. (180)

Whitman clearly is reversing not only Mary Shelley's valorisation of "the world" here as a kind of "hell," but also Milton's view of it as the place of post-lapsarian man's exile from paradise. Whitman's "world" would seem to be much closer to Wordsworth's revision of it as the singular poet's earthly place of imaginative presence. Yet Whitman's "world" as word effaces Wordsworth's "earth." It embraces, or subsumes, both terms of Wordsworth's opposition in the opening lines of "The Prelude." In fact, it is "the road" in Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" which can be read as connecting Wordsworth's "city" and "earth" and thus effacing, or overcoming, the long literary history of the "culture"/"nature" opposition which Wordsworth perpetuates in the very act of inverting its valorisation. This looks like a victorious moment for (Whitman's) poetry, for if the "unity" of Wordsworth's unit "earth" is based on a separation from the "city" and thus subverted as "unity" by the duality in which it is inscribed, Whitman might appear as the poet who (re-)establishes that unity of "paradise" lost, not only in Milton's poem but in Wordsworth's revision of it as well, through the metaphorical link of "the (open) road."

But in "opening" the poem to the process of literary reference Whitman returns the poem, and its reader, to the very "librairies" which, in line 6 of section 1, he claimed he was "done with" and to the book which, in section 15, he wanted "unopen'd." Moreover, in the final section of his own poem, Whitman re-writes his own revision of Wordsworth's rewriting of Milton's vision of the journey into the-world-as-exile, itself revised from Genesis. Whitman even shifts languages momentarily:

> Allons! the road is before us!

In this line, Whitman's "the road" replaces "the world" of line 2, section 1, and Whitman's "us" his and Wordsworth's former "me." Whitman also recuperates Wordsworth's "is." This process of substitution opens the poem not only to other works of literature but to itself as literature, revealing the poem not only as a "poem distilled from other poems" but also as a poem distilled from its own words. The "world" apparently outside the poem turns out to be one word among others within it.

If the poem recalls Milton and Wordsworth only to reject their view of "the World" or "the earth," it does so in a poem where the reader, to remain a reader, must disobey the poet, who, earlier in the poem, claims in his world an absolute authority:

> It is useless to protest. I know all and expose it.
>   (line 27, section 13)

To read the poem, then, in its own terms, we would seem to occupy, and to be forced to occupy, the role of the "active rebellion," to take a phrase from the poem, or, to rephrase this in terms of the poem's possible frame of reference, Satan's role vis-à-vis an omniscient authority, and to "fall," or travel, through our act of "disobedience," the act of reading, not only into "the world," no matter how conceived within or without "heaven" and "hell," but into literature, into the world of words.

For a poet purportedly dedicated to the primacy of literature over life this is a monstrous vision.

3

Something else happens that must have been at least equally monstrous for a person who like Whitman had not only placed what he called an "absolute acknowledgment" (728) of, or faith in, "the idea of political liberty" but had made of "the people" themselves the guarantor of the value of the "new" poetry that was to arise out of this "faith" and this "people." For Whitman has set up an equation between (free) political order and (free) artistic form(s) in such a way that a loss of "faith" in "the people" necessarily undermines, and in its very idea, the value of the "new" poetry.

Whitman acknowledges the possibility only once, in passing, in the 1855 preface, and calls it "monstrous":

> The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen. (710)

It is just this monstrous vision which erupts in *Democratic Vistas*, a prose work written after the Civil War and published in parts, some in 1867 and more in 1870:

> [...] society, in these States, is canker'd, crude, superstitious, and rotten. Political or law-made society is, and private, or voluntary society, is also. In any vigor, the element of the moral conscience, the most important, the verteber to State or man, seems to me either entirely lacking, or seriously enfeebled or ungrown.
>
> I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face, like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believ'd in, (for all this hectic glow, and these melodramatic screamings,) nor is humanity itself believ'd in. What penetrating eye does not everywhere see through the mask? The spectacle is appaling. (DV, 11-12)

What we can glimpse here is something like the rupture of Whitman's equation, or identity, for the "new" poetry. Among the correctives Whitman calls in his poets:

> I demand races of orbic bards, with unconditional uncompromising sway. Come forth, sweet democratic despots of the west! (DV, 58)

What we have here is a movement in Whitman's work, which, were we to follow on the same road, would lead us to what we find in the later Pound, among others: a politicisation of literature, of language, of the word itself, where the poet as "despot," or the dictator as "poet," "restores" the "natural" or "paradisal" order threatened or destroyed by a "civilization" seen as otherwise irreparably corrupt and corrupting. In his 1856 "Letter to Emerson," Whitman tells America what to do to those poets whose idea of difference – of "America," in other words – differs from his:

> Strangle the singers who will not sing you loud and strong. (732)

Thus the apparent "poet of democracy," with his total or "absolute acknowledgment" of "the idea of political liberty," develops a nationalist poetics with consequences which, were we to stay within the confines of political vocabulary, we would have difficulty not considering totalitarian.

If Whitman's identity collapses, so, too, does the structure of his oppositions. For Whitman's celebrated binary opposition, America/Europe, as well as his valorisation, can be found within the very European literature he purportedly meant to subvert. In "The Revolt of Islam," for example, the long poem Percy Shelley was composing when Mary Shelley was finishing

Frankenstein, we find "America" proclaimed as the "land" of "youth," "truth" and "freedom":

> 'There is a People mighty in its youth,
>   A land beyond the oceans of the West,
> Where, though with rudest rites, Freedom and Truth
>   Are worshipped; (4414-4417)

In Shelley the opposition Europe/America is also presented in terms of death/life:

> An epitaph of glory for the tomb
> Of murdered Europe may thy fame be made,
>   Great People! (4437-29)

Like Whitman, Shelley combines religious and political imagery to present a secular version of "a new Heaven" located in "America":

> Yes, in the desert there is built a home
>   For Freedom. Genius is made strong to rear
> The monuments of man beneath the dome
>   Of a new Heaven; myriads assemble there,
>   Whom the proud lords of man, in rage or fear,
> Drive from their wasted homes: the boon I pray
>   Is this – that Cythna shall be convoyed there –
> Nay, start not at the name – America! (4432-9)

(South) America was also the place of exile Mary Shelley's "monster" sought, equally in vain, for himself and his "Eve."

Neither Whitman's opposition, then, nor the valorisation of its opposed terms can be seen as new, or, for that matter, as American. They have their roots in European literature. In fact, it is the history of this opposition that subverts Whitman's apparently subversive use of it.

4

There is, however, another Whitman who resists the nationalist reading that can be drawn from his own statements. I want to "close" what are meant to be only opening remarks by taking the poet "at his word," literally, in *Democratic Vistas*, where he announces that his word is susceptible to

substitution: "(This Soul – its other name, in these Vistas, is LITERATURE)."
This is what happens when one substitutes:

> In vain do we march with unprecedented strides to empire so
> colossal, outvying the antique, beyond Alexander's, beyond the
> proudest sway of Rome. In vain [...]. It is as if we were somehow
> being endow'd with a vast and more and more thoroughly-appointed
> body, and then left with little or no LITERATURE. (DV, 13) [...] The
> true question to ask respecting a book, is, *has it helped any human*
> LITERATURE? (DV, 74)

I would like to suggest that Whitman can be read more interestingly not
as the simple nationalist he is often considered but as one of the first
"deconstructionists" in American literature. This other Whitman is
alternative to himself, or at least to one of the readings of himself he himself
has perpetrated or perpetuated. But "deconstruction" here is not unlike the
dismemberment that finds its monstrous image in *Frankenstein*. For in the
1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* Whitman disinters the corpse he buried in
the opening of the same text:

> The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what
> has been and is. He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands
> them again on their feet ... he says to the past, Rise and walk before
> me that I may realize you. (716)

In a later essay, "How I made a Book," Whitman resurrects Milton from the
exemplary dead:

> Ever since what might be called thought, or the budding of thought,
> fairly began in my youthful mind I had had a desire to attempt some
> worthy record of that entire faith and acceptance ("to justify the ways
> of God to man" is Milton's well-known and ambitious phrase) which
> is the foundation of moral America. (DV, 136)

The first person to subvert Whitman's anti-literary position, then, is
Whitman himself. His anti-literary stance turns out not only to be a fiction
but, within literature, an impossibility. It is undermined not only by the sheer
existence of his literature as such, but, if he is taken at his word, by nothing
less than his word itself. He shares something here with Mary Shelley. For
whatever warning Mary Shelley writes into her critique of the creative act
must, if valid, apply to her own; the book is thus inscribed within the very
limits it would seem to circumvent and thus, like Victor, falls victim to its

own (monstrous) vision. Just as the "creature" or character is withdrawn from the "author" in *Frankenstein*, so in Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" the word is withdrawn from the authority of "the world." In fact, the "world" reveals itself as word, and as only one word, among others, subject like them to substitution, and thus, even as "road," erodible.

The road itself can be seen as that which penetrates "nature," or "the earth," or even possibly "the world." Although Whitman does not use the verb in "Song of the Open Road," he does use the verb elsewhere, in *Democratic Vistas*, in discussing what he calls "the great literature":

> Few are aware how the great literature penetrates all, gives hue to all, shapes aggregates and individuals, and, after subtle ways, with irresistible power, constructs, sustains, demolishes at will. (DV, 6)

The "irresistible power" of "the great literature" may have something to do with Whitman's desire to have the reader leave "the book on the shelf unopen'd." For it is this "irresistible power," not of a person but of "the great literature," that keeps Whitman not only from being recognized as, but also from being, the "original," "new breed" of poet that he wants to be. And this, for a poet with Whitman's ambitions, is a monstrous vision indeed.

*

Both the prose writer Mary Shelley and the poet Walt Whitman show us, then, in their differing ways, that the body of literature cannot completely hide its stitches. But one cannot say that this body blocks discourse, unless one at least means among other things the blocks of print in a book, for literature turns out to generate itself in the hands and mouths of its monstrous (re)visionaries, or revisionists, in such a way that "authorship," authority itself, becomes, or can become, fictionalized. My own text has been a collocation of fragments stitched together and, hopefully, reanimated. As this "work" withdraws itself from its "author" and heads off into "darkness and distance," I would like to remind you that I too have dismembered and remembered the body and that thus the monstrous vision I have been presenting was also, though it no longer entirely is, my own monstrous vision.

Works Cited

Milton, John. "Paradise Lost." 1674 text, in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Edited by Merritt Y. Hughes. Indianapolis: The Odyssey Press (Bobbs-Merrill), 1977.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (The 1818 text). Edited by James Rieger. Indianpolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982; (1831 text): Edited by Maurice Hindle. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985.

————. *"Proserpine" and "Midas."* London: Humphrey Milford, 1922.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Poetical Works*. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. Comprehensive Reader's Edition. New York: New York University Press, 1965.

————. *Democratic Vistas*. London: Walter Scott, 1888.

Wordsworth, William. *Poetical Works*. London: Oxford University Press, 1936.

————. *The Prelude*. New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1979.