

## The Gothic Game

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'It is possible,' according to Camus, 'to separate the literature of consent, which coincides, by and large, with ancient history and the classical period from the literature of rebellion which begins in modern times'.<sup>1</sup> That 'possibility' has subsequently been eagerly entertained, as even a casual reading of both the critical reflections upon and the self-perceptions of literary modernity would quickly confirm. And perhaps there, in that eagerness, there is matter for further reflection.

Let us allow at the outset that, at the level of cultural intentionality, there is an initial case to be made for Camus's historical and literary division: that is, to assign the activity and effect of rebellion to the writing practice of an epoch is to insist upon a certain wilfulness in that practice — a wilfulness that easily accommodates itself to the cultural struggle to be modern. For 'modernity' is volitional, not circumstantial: from the late fifth century onwards, according to Habermas, and with varying contents,

the term "modern" again and again expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new.<sup>2</sup>

That modernity is itself the effect of a wilful cultural effort should not be in question — doubtless in time, and in the midst of its self-recognitions, each period participates more or less in its own volitional novelty. The question here is rather how the content of *this* modernity came to be defined not only by its rebellious character but also by the character of its rebelliousness. Because that is Camus's point: disdaining 'consent', rebellious modernity (or literary modernity in any case) is figured as irreducible to the moment of its impulsive reaction against the past and has come to be distinguished instead both by the perceived violence of its break with the Classical tradition and by the apparent discovery of an oppositional insistence within its own textual being. Thus for Barthes:

The social intervention of a text (not necessarily achieved at the time the text appears) is measured not by the popularity of its audience or by the fidelity of the socio-economic reflection it contains or projects to a few eager sociologists, but rather by the violence that enables it to *exceed* the laws that a society, an ideology, a philosophy establish for themselves in a fine surge of historical intelligibility. This excess is called: writing.<sup>3</sup>

So the text confirms itself as essentially rebellious when it is most faithful to its own being — ‘writing’ — and it thereby also confirms its role within the intentionality of modernity: for read in this way the text becomes implicated in, and finds its meaning in, the apprehension of a generalized movement of rebellion when modernity finds its political orientation on the side of the Other — on the side of the improper, the immoral, the illicit, the scandalous, the excessive — and when text and modernity are therefore grasped together as the effects of an essential transgression.

This valorization of the transgressive in contemporary reflection is, by and large, an unremarkable event, for transgression can be seen as providing a rationale not only for the literature but also for much of the literary culture of the post-Classical period. There is, for example, the tangled sequence that commences with Poe: by a fortuitous conjunction the work of this Gothic visionary, dipsomaniac and sexual monster (or so he was to be represented after the marriage with his thirteen year-old cousin) is translated into French by a dissolute revolutionary — Charles Baudelaire. Compounding this relation the reclusive Flaubert is called to answer charges of obscenity for the publication of *Madame Bovary* before the same court, for the same charge, and in the same year (1856), as Baudelaire for his *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The novel of adultery is allowed, six of the poems are suppressed, but more importantly the irresistible thematics of modern writing culture are indelibly drawn in and from this constellation of events: rebellion, sexual deviance, obsession, a kind of mystical seclusion from the world and a concomitant devotion to the task of writing, and (most significant of all in this context) defiant confrontation with a prohibitive law. The same scenario is to be played out again and again as the trials proliferate through the years — *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer* — and of course all of these have their own interest as discrete events, but it is their cumulative historico-cultural effect that is truly crucial. For in the successive persistence of these identical dramas, transgression begins to acquire its emphatic modern value — in the words of Henry Miller: ‘Whenever a taboo is broken, something good happens, something vitalizing.’<sup>4</sup> Freed from the stigma of mere wrongdoing, the event of transgression (increasingly understood as a fracturing of the code: societal, moral, ideological, formal) comes to be read not as the effect of but as the initiating moment of modernity and as that which imposes an effective historical trajectory upon it, directing it towards liberation in successive convulsions that outstrip and overcome an anterior order of prohibition and repression.

No doubt it is the current postmodern sense of our own transgressive novelty that accounts for our re-discovery in recent years of the Gothic: that fascinating group of texts that appear to record the dreamscape of Otherness in all of its illicit perversity; texts that appear to enact the violent contest of repression and liberation; and, crucially, texts that arrive simultaneously with the sense of European modernity itself. From the very first it was possible to discover in them a rebellious and liberating movement within textuality: 'This genre, Sade was to claim at the time,

was the inevitable product of the revolutionary shocks with which the whole of Europe resounded. For those who were acquainted with all the ills that are brought upon men by the wicked, the romantic novel was becoming somewhat difficult to write, and merely monotonous to read: there was nobody left who had not experienced more misfortunes in four or five years than could be depicted in a century by literature's most famous novelists: it was necessary to call upon hell for aid in order to arouse interest, and to find in the land of fantasies what was common knowledge from historical observation of man in this iron age.<sup>5</sup>

The 'hell' and the 'land of fantasies' invoked here find their correlatives in contemporary analysis in that more recent but intimately related lexicon of Otherness which — as is already implied in Sade — rehearses the distinctively modern narrative of repression, rebellion, transgression, and liberation. It is most succinctly put by William Patrick Day in his *In The Circles of Fear and Desire*:

The realistic novel had given the new, urban, middle class readers a definition of reality, of their outer, social lives, and their public fables of identity. The Gothic fantasy provided this same group with internal definitions of the reality they felt and experienced, definitions that might not fit with public fables. It helped shape its readers' sense of their own subjectivity. In this way the Gothic is part of that process by which we move from thinking of our inner life in terms of souls to thinking of it in terms of psyches.<sup>6</sup>

It is this tracing of the shift from soul to psyche that accounts for the character of the critical attention that the Gothic has come to receive. From the very first this genre had presented itself to the reflective eye as an object of cryptic fascination — a body of work not to be attended to (as in the didactic novel of eighteenth century manners) nor to be 'experienced' (as in the emergent realist novel) but rather to be *deciphered*. For, on reflection, the destiny of the Gothic text was to be *puzzling*; and when the practice of writing shifts from the symbolic to the cryptographic, when the text is detached from the order of the novelistic and given over to the order of the sign, then critical practice must work at bringing to light the 'unspoken' of the text, that inarticulate immanence embedded within the signal delirium

of the Gothic story. Whence a certain allegorization of the Gothic text — a mode of analysis which, in recent critical reflection, has had the effect of confirming the Gothic within the modern dynamic of transgression, whereby the text is both recruited to and provides evidence for the reading of literary modernity as the trace of the transgressive Other.

Not surprisingly the text that has attracted the greatest amount of critical attention is *The New Prometheus* or, as it is less rebelliously titled, *Frankenstein*. For here would be found the essential themes and imagery out of which the sense of the new was made: there is the figure of the obsessive and solitary artificer, the emphasis upon a perverse or distorted sexuality, the union of artistic creation with metaphysical rebellion, the oneiric quality of both the tale and the circumstances of the telling (oneiric or fantastic or both, as the text seems to insist upon by likening the narrative situation more than once to the nightmarish encounter of the wedding guest with the Ancient Mariner). In fact a brief survey of some of the more intriguing of the recent interpretations of *Frankenstein* reveals it to be an exemplary modern text — at least in the sense in which I am using that term, ‘modern’, here.

In *Signs Taken for Wonders* Franco Monetti has argued that ‘The literature of terror is born precisely out of the terror of a split society’ — that is, modern industrial society split between the competing realms of worker and capital — and ‘out of the desire to heal’ that split. This ‘split’ Monetti reads as figured in the characters of and relationship between *Frankenstein* and the creature:

Like the proletariat, the monster is denied a name and an individuality. He is the *Frankenstein* monster; he belongs wholly to his creator (just as one can speak of a ‘Ford worker’). Like the proletariat, he is a *collective* and *artificial* creature. He is not found in nature, but built. *Frankenstein* is a productive *inventor*-scientist . . . Reunited and brought back to life in the monster are the limbs of those — the ‘poor’ — whom the breakdown of feudal relations has forced into brigandage, poverty and death. Only modern science — this metaphor for ‘the dark Satanic mills’ — can offer them a future.<sup>7</sup>

In narrativizing the essential conflicts of industrial society, Monetti argues, the Gothic tends at once to give expression to the traumas of social existence under capitalism while it exorcizes those traumas via the mechanisms of narrative figuration and closure (which serve to resolve those conflicts at an aesthetic level). ‘Illiberal in a deep sense,’ he concludes, the Gothic ‘mirrors and promotes the desire for an integrated society, a capitalism that manages to be ‘organic’<sup>8</sup> The Gothic is thus marked simultaneously by the return of the repressed

(via the metaphoricity of character and action) and by the sublimation of repressed desire (via the overcoming of terror through narrative closure): it therefore enacts the dynamic of psycho-social trauma and ideological recuperation.

Other readers have been less inclined to stress the 'illiberal' character of the literature of terror than Monetti — especially in the case of *Frankenstein* — and thus have come to direct critical attention more forcefully towards its narrative capacity to provide release for repressed material of a psycho-social, socio-sexual, and even psycho-biographical kind. Thus Ellen Moers, writing in the mid 1970s, put forward a powerful claim for the subversive aspects of the text in terms of Mary Shelley's own psychic investment in its radical figurative distortions. Noting that happy maternal reactions are 'deeply rooted in our cultural mythology, and certainly in our literature,' Moers places critical emphasis upon Frankenstein's abandonment of the creature at the moment it receives the spark of life. 'Here,' she claims,

is where Mary Shelley's book is most interesting, most powerful, and most feminine: in the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding its consequences. Most of the novel, roughly two of its three volumes, can be said to deal with the retribution visited upon monster and creator for deficient infant care. *Frankenstein* seems to be distinctively a woman's mythmaking on the subject of birth precisely because its emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth.<sup>9</sup>

Quite apart from the manifest differences in interpretation Moers's reading of *Frankenstein* departs dramatically from Monetti's in assigning a subversive edge to the text which is not blunted by its being recuperated — by whatever textual or interpretative strategy — back into the normative emphases of early nineteenth-century socio-sexual discourse. It is true that this second reading allows the text a certain therapeutic value, but that value exists exclusively for the writing subject, exclusively for Mary Shelley who, it is implied, benefits psychologically from this process of literary construction and the psychic exorcism it performs for *her*; significantly this is a personalized value that does not translate to the wider socio-cultural environment. In this sense Moers's is an avowedly 'rebellious' reading of the Gothic in general and of *Frankenstein* in particular in so far as it conceives of the Gothic text as providing liberating expression both for the tortured psyche of Mary Shelley<sup>10</sup> and for the socially scandalous questioning of maternity which, it is implied, conceals beneath a complex of associated cultural values — social increase, familial harmony, the ordered transfer of property, and so on — the suppressed

actuality of female suffering in the dual traumas of childbirth and infant mortality.

In their more detailed reading of *Frankenstein*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, taking their cue from Moers's response, tie the question of the constrained place of women in late Georgian society to the question of the constrained place of the woman writer in English patriarchal literary culture, and in particular to the woman writer's relationship to the presiding 'male culture myth': *Paradise Lost*.<sup>11</sup> The 'agony of female sexuality' specified by Moers is thus given a socio-literary aetiology in Gilbert and Gubar's analysis:

Mary Shelley would have absorbed a keen sense of the agony of female sexuality, and specifically of the perils of motherhood, not just from *Paradise Lost* and from her own mother's fearfully exemplary fate but also from Wollstonecraft's almost prophetically anxious writings.<sup>12</sup>

Gilbert and Gubar are thus enabled to both enlarge and focus the subversive reference of the text, at the same time assigning it an historico-cultural specificity, crystallized in a kind of literary squaring-off between Mary Shelley and John Milton. 'For it becomes increasingly clear as one reads *Frankenstein* with *Paradise Lost* in mind,' according to this reading, that

*Frankenstein* is ultimately a mock *Paradise Lost* in which both Victor and his monster, together with a number of secondary characters, play all the neo-biblical parts over and over again — all except, it seems at first, the part of Eve. Not just the striking omission of any obvious Eve-figure from this "Woman's book" about Milton, but also the barely concealed sexual components of the story as well as our earlier analysis of Milton's bogey<sup>13</sup> should tell us, however, that for Mary Shelley the part of Eve is all the parts.<sup>14</sup>

The 'agony of female sexuality' broadens from the particularized trauma of the afterbirth to that of an essentially tortured existence played out in the anguished lives of every character in this text. Moreover, as parodic re-writing of the most potent myth of patriarchal literary culture, the text illuminates the complicity of the putatively 'disinterested' poetic word in the maintenance of the constricting and — for the woman writing — fundamentally hostile socio-cultural environment. The situation of the woman writing, in this instance, becomes analogous to that of the typical Gothic heroine — Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Immalee in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Agnes in *The Monk* — an analogy signalled here by the significant absence of that heroine, confined within the male domain and subject to its pleasure. Far from being therapeutic, then, the practice of writing in this instance enacts instead the monologue of terrorized delirium:

'Most obviously,' Gilbert and Gubar contend of their own reading, 'the dreamlike shifting of fantasy figures from part to part, costume to costume, tells us that we are in fact dealing with the psychodrama or waking dream that Shelley herself suspected she had written.'<sup>15</sup>

Finally it is worth drawing attention to Gayatri Spivak's essay 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', which — in addition to the socio-political and politico-sexual analyses already considered — reads *Frankenstein* as an interrogative irruption within the self-conceptions of early nineteenth-century imperialism. Focussing upon the theme of production, Spivak argues that the text problematizes the relationship between the formally distinct functions of sexual reproduction (the feminine familial function) and the production of the social subject (the male imperialist function), and it does this by conflating the two in the figure and activity of Victor Frankenstein, whose laboratory thereby becomes 'an artificial womb where both projects are undertaken simultaneously.'<sup>16</sup> In this reading, then, the text challenges the normative discourses of empire and the family through their distorted resiting in, and confusion within, the singular character of Victor, who thus can be read as dramatizing the problematics of the missionary imposition. The crucial moment in 'this overtly didactic text',<sup>17</sup> as Spivak sees it, is that point at which Frankenstein aborts the intended bride of the creature — an admission of confused paralysis at both the sexual and the social levels of production. 'In the final judgement of classical psychoanalysis,' Spivak argues,

the phallic mother exists only by virtue of the castration anxious son; in *Frankenstein's* judgement, the hysteric father (Victor Frankenstein gifted with his laboratory — the womb of theoretical reason) cannot produce a daughter. Here the language of racism — the dark side of imperialism understood as social mission — combines with the hysteria of masculism into the idiom of (the withdrawal of) sexual reproduction rather than subject-constitution. The roles of masculine and feminine individualists are hence reversed and displaced.<sup>18</sup>

The argument here, then, is that Victor's failure to create again in his own image (a failure at the level of sexual reproduction) gives rise to an atavistic fear of the alien and a paralysis of missionary nerve (a failure at the level of imperialist subject-constitution):

Frankenstein cannot produce a "daughter" because "she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate . . . [and because] one of the first results of those sympathies for which the demon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror." This particular narrative strand also launches a thoroughgoing critique of the

eighteenth century European discourses on the origin of society through (Western Christian) man.<sup>19</sup>

And here with Spivak's reading, in which the transgressive energy of Mary Shelley's text is raised to its highest pitch, it is perhaps time to pause and reflect upon these contemporary reflections upon the Gothic. In sketching these responses here I did not wish to *reproduce* a series of analyses (analyses whose intentionally provocative character and whose penetration I could not have reproduced here in any case) — I wished rather to indicate the *figurative content* of recent analysis as it pertains to the Gothic text. Because I would suggest that that content, and therefore the mode of analysis it sustains, has been determined in part by the wilfulness of modernity itself — or indeed (to press the point) is a part of the self-representation of a volitional modernity and therefore is participant in the realization of that 'possibility' Camus identifies as potentially definitive of the literature of post-Classicism. This is evidenced not only in the figurative content of critical reflection but also in the movement imposed upon analysis (from Monetti, and the politicized but 'illiberal' text, to Spivak, and the text as launching 'a thoroughgoing critique of eighteenth century European discourses on the origin of society') — a movement distinguished by a kind of ratchet-like upping of the ante on the subversive potency of the genre. In this way the Gothic text is recruited to and finds its place within an historical narrative, epic in scope and (aptly enough) Promethean in character: it becomes the occasion for, and under analytic pressure it occasions, a liberating return of the repressed, a scandalous staging of the Other — scrambled, distorted, displaced, to be sure (such is the very *business* of the psychotic text), but evoked nevertheless in the disfiguring mechanisms of the text and, what is more, destined to be deciphered.

(I hasten to add that no such grandiose claims are made by any of the writers to whom I have referred in this essay; moreover each of those writers would, I suspect, reject this characterization as inexcusably vulgar. I accept the charge of vulgarity, but would still want to claim a substantial accuracy for the characterization I have given both of recent analytical dealings with Gothic texts and of the historical emphases these dealings disclose: that is, my reflections are gratuitous only in their vulgarity.)

The point to emphasize here — although it scarcely requires emphasis at this stage — is that in the case of the Gothic contemporary critical reflection has had the effect of reducing the novelistic to the symptomatic. That is the reason for the essential identity of analytic



mode among the widely divergent interpretative responses cited here (and it is the reason for my vulgarity above, which is intended to answer in part to the critical vulgarization of the text). At the same time I would be keen to allow that the Gothic *occasions* this reductive and vulgar analytic mode, that it is ultimately *complicit* in its critical reception as cryptogram (whether individualized as psychobiography or generalized as cultural irruption). Gothic texts — the more extreme examples of them, in any case, such as the text at hand — are precisely those in which the subjects and events of the narrative *cannot occur* according to a normative code of social possibility, and yet they are also those texts in which an exorbitant apparatus of the real is employed in order to insist upon the actuality of the literally incredible (whence the emphatic presence of letters and other documents from the frozen Pole in *Frankenstein* or from reclusive scribes in *Melmoth the Wanderer*; whence also the convoluted confessional forms of *The Monk*, *Melmoth the Wanderer* and, again, *Frankenstein*). It is this conflict of textual interests — realist and fantasist — that necessitates a speculative response that cannot terminate at the nominated real and yet is impressed to gesture towards it. And this critical indecision is correlated precisely with a functional indecision in the text which appears, in *Frankenstein*, from the very first word of the unsigned 'Preface' as a musing upon the plausibility or implausibility of the tale the text is about to tell: 'The event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr Darwin and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as not of impossible occurrence.'<sup>20</sup> That double negative is the opening gambit of a fundamentally ludic text which will here explicitly claim that in its simultaneous positing and withholding of the real, in its calculated mimetic hesitation, the space of the Other is opened, and a *realer* real flashes into existence. 'I shall not,' the 'Preface' continues,

be supposed as according the remotest degree of serious faith to such an imagination; yet, in assuming it as the basis of a work of fancy, I have not considered myself as entirely weaving a series of supernatural terrors. The event on which the interest of the story depends is exempt from the disadvantages of a mere tale of spectres or enchantment. It was recommended by the novelty of the situations which it develops, and however impossible as a physical fact, affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield.

So in a prefatory moment this text understands itself as gesturing towards — without ever arriving with any degree of certainty at ('not impossible') — a repressed but compelling Otherness; and this gesture,

embodied in a mimetic hesitation that is distinctly Gothic (or so I would argue), is always liable to confirm the deepest suspicions of its respondents which indeed is, I suspect, what *Frankenstein* has done for the respondents cited here.

That the Gothic represented a radical interrogation of normative eighteenth and early nineteenth-century reality is not in question — there is at least general agreement on this point from those writers referred to earlier, and in any case it is clear both from the *Frankenstein* ‘Preface’ and from Sade’s contemporary view that this was a more or less explicit principle supervising the Gothic enterprise. Less noticed, however, or at least of less apparent analytic interest, is the consequence of this interrogation, which amounted to a questioning of the processes of signification by which that reality was indicated and, in effect, instituted as empirical fact. That is why the Gothic became *the* place of dynamic textual experimentation, and why formally the Gothic text is marked by a set of narrative procedures which bear either a parodic or an interrogative relation to the typical procedures of the realist text. Indeed, the Gothic tends to employ the techniques of realism only in order to bring them into ironic collision with the intractable materials of fantasy — as in the elaborate documentation of *Frankenstein* already referred to, which serves to sustain throughout the text that dialectic of plausibility-implausibility with which it commences. Similarly one finds in the genre as a whole a proclivity for excessively artificial narrative structures, a tendency towards a doubling of or blurring of character, a general reliance upon first-person narration, often embedded within other first-person narrations — all observable aspects of *Frankenstein*, and all throwing doubt upon the validity of those novelistic features that most surely work towards securing the incontestable nature of the reality the text purports to represent (features such as the linear development of narrative, the organic conception of plot and character, and the disinterested objectivity of omniscient narration). The inherent danger of such a development is that, in exposing the real as fiction — as the Gothic parodically and subversively exposes eighteenth-century reality and, in particular, its novelistic representations — one may not be able to secure it again as fact. The logic of such a process leads inevitably to the brink of meaninglessness, to a point where meaning abruptly reverses itself in a kind of tailspin of insignificance. And this, I suspect, is what occurs in *Frankenstein*, and indeed defines quite precisely what I have called that text’s mimetic hesitation, the crucial textual action and the central informing principle of a story which, after all, is about the terrors of artifice.

'And do I dare to ask you to undertake my pilgrimage,' an anguished Victor Frankenstein rhetorically questions Walton at the conclusion of his story:

to endure the hardships that I have undergone? No; I am not so selfish. Yet, when I am dead, if he should appear, if the ministers of vengeance should conduct him to you, swear that he shall not live — swear that he shall not triumph over my accumulated woes and survive to add to the list of his dark crimes. He is eloquent and persuasive, and once his words had even power over my heart; but trust him not. (p.482)

It is entirely typical of Victor to claim unselfishness and verbal naivety at the moment his own rhetoric is torturing an unpalatable negative into a desirable positive, as he begins by refusing to implicate Walton in his own obsession and concludes by demanding that he swear to it. Hence the added stress one must give that final irony, when Victor admits his fear of the rhetorical power of the creature. We at least can attest to the creature's oratorical power, since even Victor could not suppress this (indeed, he seemed suspiciously almost to highlight it) in his report of the creature's tale which does not fail to elicit the reader's sympathy. But Victor's fear is real enough in this context because it is the fear of artifice — the fear that words will be taken for realities. His concern, of course, is that *his* words only should function in this way, as is made perfectly clear only ten pages earlier when he betrays a momentary pride in his own rhetorical power while relating the entire story yet again, this time to a magistrate:

The magistrate listened to me with attention and kindness. 'Be assured, sir,' said he, 'no pains or exertions on my part shall be spared to discover the villain.'

'I thank you,' replied I; 'listen, therefore, to the deposition that I have to make. It is indeed a tale so strange that I should fear you would not credit it were there not something in truth which, however wonderful, forces conviction. The story is too connected to be mistaken for a dream, and I have no motive for falsehood.' My manner as I thus addressed him was impressive but calm; I had formed in my own heart a resolution to pursue my destroyer to death, and this purpose quieted my agony and for an interval reconciled me to life. I now related my history briefly but with firmness and precision, marking the dates with accuracy and never deviating into invective or exclamation. (p.471)

That Victor had *rehearsed* his story and that even in rehearsal he had related it with an acute self-consciousness of its effects upon an audience are points which strike neither Victor nor Walton as important. Consequently in a stunning finale of self-congratulation and (appropriately) misconception, Victor falls victim to his own rhetoric when, in an ironic episode unmatched in this text, he *reads* a transcript of his own story, thus situating himself in the position

of Walton, Mrs Saville and, of course, ourselves, and thereby apparently orchestrating our collective response: 'During these last days I have been occupied in examining my past conduct; nor do I find it blameable,' he tells Walton (p.490). And then, referring to their earlier conversation, he observes:

The task of [the creature's] destruction was mine, but I have failed. When actuated by selfish and vicious motives, I asked you to undertake my unfinished work, and I renew this request now, when I am only induced by reason and virtue. (p.490)

But by this stage Victor's motives must surely be subject to suspicion, especially when he draws explicit attention to their purity.

Not that Victor is a deceitful character — far from it. It is simply that he has become absorbed by the fictional propensities of language, caught up in its play of truth and duplicity, plausibility and implausibility, as he was destined to as soon as he began to confess his own Gothic story. For more than any other it was the first-person narrative mode — this *confessional* narrative mode — that attracted the subversive attentions of the writers of the Gothic (just as it had attracted the ironic attentions of writers like Swift and Sterne throughout the preceding century). One of the crucial emphases within Gothic writing is that any first-person narration is always fatally compromised — partly because of the apodeictic character of this mode, as it appears to secure with the greatest degree of certainty the reality of that world it purports to record; partly because, while claiming the status of truth, first-person narratives necessarily involve the accounting of an interested party; but especially — when placed against the background of the historical development of English Gothic writing — because the narrative of confession will always be compromised by its Catholic origins.

As texts like *Vathek*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Monk* make abundantly clear, the Gothic was not only an outlet for a penetrating inquiry into the self-representations of normative eighteenth and early nineteenth-century reality, but also for both the experimental and the xenophobic energies of the contemporary writer. Hence the tendency to situate the narrative in Catholic Spain, France and Italy, whereby an atmosphere of duplicity was automatically evoked for the English reading public — an atmosphere which, in the development of the confessional narrative mode, was to spill over into a poetics of duplicity, and entire aesthetics of dissimulation, by the time of *Frankenstein* and *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Such a poetics was to give a crucial emphasis both to the ludic character of the text (its

*game* with the real) as well as to the corrosive effect of the text (its subversive *questioning* of the real). And, as if to confirm this developmental emphasis within the genre as a whole, confession and Catholicism emerge simultaneously at two crucial moments in this text in such a way as to effectively undermine the authority of the tale as it is told (ambiguity intended).

The second of these two instances occurs in Catholic Ireland, where Victor is accused of the murder of Clerval because his delirium has been mistaken for confession — and thus is taken for truth — by the servants of the jail (that is, in this context, by the oppressed and self-oppressing subjects of mystificatory Roman authority):

‘For that matter,’ replied the old woman, ‘if you mean about the gentleman you murdered, I believe that it were better for you if you were dead, for I fancy it will go hard with you! However, that’s none of my business; I am sent to nurse you and get you well; I do my duty with a safe conscience; it were well if everybody did the same.’

I turned with loathing from the woman who could utter so unfeeling a speech to a person just saved, on the very edge of death; but I felt languid and unable to reflect on all that had passed. The whole series of my life appeared to me as a dream: I sometimes doubted if indeed it were all true, for it never presented itself to my mind with the force of reality. (pp.448-9)

This association of fantasy with confession is not without its significance; however the earlier instance is perhaps more telling in that it makes explicit the relation between confession, Catholicism and duplicity: it is Justine’s confession. ‘I did confess,’ she tells Victor and Elizabeth.

but I confessed a lie. I confessed that I might obtain absolution; but now that falsehood lies heavier at my heart than all my other sins. The God of heaven forgive me! Ever since I was condemned, my confessor has besieged me; he threatened and menaced, until I almost began to think that I was the monster that he said I was. He threatened excommunication and hell fire in my last moments if I continued obdurate. Dear lady, I had none to support me; all looked on me as a wretch doomed to ignominy and perdition. What could I do? In an evil hour I subscribed to a lie; and now only am I truly miserable.’ (p.350)

By virtue of its critical role in the textual construction of and evocation of a *certain* reality, by virtue of its imposing character, its evidentiary force, but principally by virtue of its background in the perceived duplicity of Catholic confession, first-person narration was to become for the Gothic writers a favoured arena for axiological and mimetic play. And Victor is caught up in this play, which is why his story (when he reflects upon it, as in those passages quoted earlier) shifts restlessly between the twin poles of guilt and innocence, confession and

extenuation, truth and artifice — until he can no longer distinguish between the two, and neither can we. That is why, in the midst of this epistemological slippage, there is a general anxiety that some sort of documentation take place in order to confirm and to certify the reality conjured by the telling of a tale — whether the creature's to Victor, or Victor to Walton, or Walton to Mrs Saville, or the text's to us. But it appears that the written word has no more validity than the spoken — it too is caught up in the ironic play of uncertainty that permeates this text, as is clear from Victor's reading of the transcript of his own story. For at this moment the text dramatizes yet again the operation of artifice upon the real as Victor apprehends his life, mediated through the artistry of the word, and immediately yields to the seductions of the word.

At the heart of his reading Victor discovers three things about himself: his innocence, his selflessness, and his absolute difference from the creature — that is he discovers, and takes for realities, the three fictions that kill Elizabeth (an earlier event which showed the more brutal operation of artifice upon the real).<sup>21</sup> This is what Victor reads: that in innocence he rejected his creature; that unselfishly he married Elizabeth; and that the essential difference between himself and the creature blinded him to the intentions of the latter. Such a reading is available to him, of course, because Victor too is absorbed here by the Gothic game of uncertainty, and so he too, as reader, is obliged to *make something* of this fantastic story (a story that has not failed to excite successive generations of readers to try to do the same). And what strikes Victor is the epical, Manichaeian character of the tale:

During these last days I have been occupied in examining my past conduct; nor do I find it blameable. In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature and was bound towards him to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being. This was my duty; but there was another still paramount to that. My duties towards the beings of my own species had greater claims to my attention because they included a greater proportion of happiness or misery. Urged by this view, I refused, and I did right in refusing, to create a companion for the first creature. He showed unparalleled malignity and selfishness in evil; he destroyed my friends; he devoted to destruction beings who possessed exquisite sensations, happiness, and wisdom; nor do I know where this thirst for vengeance may end. Miserable himself that he may render no other wretched, he ought to die. (p.490)

Victor has responded fully to his own rhetoric here (notice, for example, his noble profession of duty towards the creature, neglecting to mention his flight from this duty for the first two years of the creature's existence), and significantly he has exemplified not only the artistry of narration but also the artistry of interpretation. The point is that

another reading is available to him, a reading which is in its way equally fictive (because it is only a *part* of a story which is never really given in full) and one which reverses this one point by point. For this second reading would insist upon the following: first, that the essential identity between Victor and the creature should have alerted him to the fact that the creature would duplicate his actions and kill his bride (indeed Victor is the only reader of this story of whom I am aware who contrives to register surprise at this event); second, that as a consequence his marriage to Elizabeth constitutes an act of gross selfishness; and third, that in his dealings with the creature Victor is clearly guilty of the crime of rejection.

But then, like everything else in this text, it can be read one way or the other, because nothing is clearly one thing or the other. Not only does the narrative extend itself into the implausible, the uncertain, the suspiciously ambiguous, but the characters also become unstable, their roles become confused, their functions become tangled. Peripheral characters are quickly absorbed into this essential instability: Elizabeth, *added* to the Frankensteins (a family which ironically grows by a principle of aggregation rather than regeneration), gets hopelessly caught up in the confusion of roles and is obliged to become sister, the mother, then wife to Victor; Walton — divided already between the megalomaniacal scientific enthusiasm of Victor and his own native empirical conservatism, literally a halfway house between Continental masculine excess (as represented by Victor) and British feminine sobriety (as represented by his sister, Mrs Saville) — Walton finds himself redoubled again as confessor to and judge of Victor, not only listening to his story but obsessively recording, transcribing, documenting it. Unable to fulfil either role, unable either to absolve or to judge, Walton is finally thrown into the ironic suspense of indecision as, refusing to reflect any further upon events, he simply stops writing. But the paradigm for all of these textual confusions, the single relationship in which each element threatens to absorb itself into the other in a vertigo of indifference, is clearly that of Victor and the creature. This point has become such a commonplace of *Frankenstein* criticism that it is perhaps only necessary to indicate the more obvious features of this tangle of roles and identities. There is, for example, the model of the unhappy family played out between the pair of them, Victor becoming 'mother' to a creature who responds to him as to a scornful father — principally, of course, because artifice, in the form of *Paradise Lost*, has played a determining role even in the creature's world.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, while Victor defiantly refuses to admit a kinship with or even species-similarity to the creature, he also

considers him 'nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave and forced to destroy all that was dear to me' (p.339). This confusion — which begins with the question of whom 'The New Prometheus' refers to, as it can legitimately apply to either — reaches an entirely appropriate climax in their final crazy race to the Pole, the creature pursuing Victor by running before him, the fugitive insanely pursuing the hunter. 'I never saw a more interesting creature,' writes Walton in his first observation of Victor (p.281), and that just about says it all.

Victor's fiction of difference, of selflessness, of guiltlessness, is not a misinterpretation of events, nor is it a misreading of his transcribed tale. It is instead an effort to arrive at a certain sense of reality — an effort undertaken by all of the central characters in this text. That anxiety over documentation to which I referred earlier represents a similar effort to 'fix' the world, as one would 'fix' a photograph — to stop it from blurring further, to paralyse it into a moment of significance, to make it mean what one would have it mean. But in this context documentation tends rather to proliferate the problem — it brings about a kind of fictive haemorrhaging from one layer of the text to the next, a contamination of the exterior tale by the interior, exemplified in the passage of those lost letters from the heart of the story within the story of the creature, those letters that lodge themselves as crucial elements within each subsequent telling, letters that appear as if they could substantiate the worlds of the text, but then fail to appear at all, the only documents lost in the passage from the Pole to England.<sup>23</sup> This giddy movement between layers of the text is in fact taken up in the structure of the narrative, which, although frequently described as an arrangement of three concentric circles, would be more accurately pictured as a spiral, since each 'circle' — each distinct 'story': the creature's, Victor's, Walton's — inevitably leaks into and implicates itself in the next. As it spirals inward the text describes a process of absorption, but here one is absorbed not into the truth of the tale — which, by an ancient logic of narrative disclosure, is always situated at the centre, the place of meaning — but absorbed rather by an essential fictionality, for that centre here is the product of artifice: the creature and his confession. Yet the effective movement of this text is outward, describing a structure of contagion: as it spirals outward the text traces the progress of a dangerous infection in which, in a vicious parody of Romantic aesthetics run amok, artifice sets upon and begins slowly to displace (to murder) the real. This contamination of an outer reality by an interior unreality was always potentially there in the abstract structure



itself, for that is the effect of frame-tale constructions where the frame, although apparently in the authoritative position because it *comprehends* everything else, is in fact radically subverted because it is drawn into the play of perspective and becomes merely one more layer in a potentially endless sequence. Given the general Gothic interest in the destabilizing of authoritative perspectives, its interest in the radical provisionality of — indeed the insubstantiality of — points of view, it is not surprising that it was to indulge in ever more extreme convolutions of the frame-tale device (indeed *Frankenstein* is a relatively conservative example when compared to the vertiginous experimentation of *Melmoth the Wanderer*). And that is why nothing is ever ‘fixed’ — and nothing can be ‘fixed’ — in this story: a radical provisionality, a failure of authority, a suspicion of artifice infects the whole, destabilizing it, rendering everything terrifyingly uncertain.

Just as this text insinuates itself into and problematizes the eighteenth-century realist tradition, so too does the creature insinuate into the world of the text the problematic principle of artifice. The very existence of the creature poses the question: at what point does the artificial become the real? Or at what point does the real cease being artificial? Every element of the text bears upon this central question, which appears to become increasingly more difficult to answer.

Read in this way it becomes tempting to play the Gothic game with *Frankenstein* one more time — to discover in its epistemological uncertainties, its mimetic hesitations, its textual instabilities, the record of some historic fatality which the text psychotically re-enacts, to apprehend it as, and to accommodate it within the wilfulness of contemporary critical discourse as, the symptomatic delirium of its age: the waning of divine authority, or the secularization of knowledge, or the ethical anguish of that rational time struggling in blood to be reasonable. Perhaps there is a case to be made — but I for one would not want to say with any certainty that that is what *Frankenstein* is about, that that is its allegory of the real, for the simple reason that *Frankenstein* is a text which actively contests the principle of certainty itself. Any reading of the text will always be ironically qualified in advance by this single fact (the only one it gives us): that at the heart of the text — symbolically, structurally, conceptually, and indeed *literally* — there is an uncertain troubling of the real by artifice. Which is why this remains a text that can be taken up again and again, always meeting us halfway, teetering on the brink of meaning, inviting us to play that Gothic game again of making something of it and, by so doing, reveal once more our pathological interest in ourselves.

## NOTES

- 1 Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p.224.
- 2 Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', *New German Critique*, 22 (winter, 1981), 3.
- 3 Roland Barthes, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), p.10.
- 4 'Interview with Henry Miller' in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, intr. Van Wyck Brooks (New York: Viking, 1963), p.183.
- 5 Quoted by Mario Praz in his 'Introduction' to *Three Gothic Novels: The Castle of Otranto, Vathek, Frankenstein* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.14 note.
- 6 William Patrick Day, *In the Circles of Fear and Desire: A Study of Gothic Fantasy* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1984), pp.10-11.
- 7 Franco Monetti, *Signs Taken For Wonders* (London: N.L.B., 1983), p.83.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp.109-110.
- 9 Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), p.93.
- 10 Cf. Moers's view (*ibid.* p.93): 'Pregnant at sixteen, and almost constantly pregnant throughout the following five years; yet not a secure mother, for she lost most of her babies soon after they were born; and not a lawful mother, for she was not married — not at least when, at the age of eighteen, Mary Godwin began to write *Frankenstein*. So are monsters born.'
- 11 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1979), p.220.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p.245.
- 13 For their discussion of "Milton's bogey" see in particular Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 187-212.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.230.      15 *Ibid.*, p.230.
- 16 Gayatri Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' in Henry Gates Jr. (ed.), *Race, Writing and Difference* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1985), p.274.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.275.      18 *Ibid.*, pp.275-6.      19 *Ibid.*, p.276.
- 20 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or The New Prometheus* in Mario Praz (ed.), *Three Gothic Novels, op. cit.*, p.267. All future references in the body of the text are to this edition.

It is worth noting, incidentally, that if we take the Gothic as commencing with Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, then this dialectic of plausibility-implausibility is in evidence from the very beginning in Walpole's 'Preface' to the first edition, where he writes:

I will detain the reader no longer but to make one short remark. Though the machinery is invention, and the names of the actors imaginary, I cannot but believe that the groundwork of the story is founded in truth. The scene is undoubtedly laid in some real castle. The author seems frequently, without design, to describe particular parts. *The chamber*, says he, *on the right hand; the door on the left hand; the distance from the chapel to Conrad's apartment*: these and other passages are strong presumptions that the author had some certain building in his eye. Curious persons, who have leisure to employ in such researches, may possibly discover in the Italian writers the foundation on which our author has built. If

a catastrophe, at all resembling that which he described, is believed to have given rise to this work, it will contribute to interest the reader, and will make *The Castle of Otranto* a still more moving story. (Praz, *op. cit.*, pp.41-42)

- 21 No doubt it is the following passage that most impresses Victor in his reading: 'If the monster executed his threat, death was inevitable; yet, again, I considered whether my marriage would hasten my fate. My destruction might indeed arrive a few months sooner, but if my torturer should suspect that I postponed it, influenced by his menaces, he would surely find other and perhaps more dreadful means of revenge. He had vowed *to be with me on my wedding night*, yet he did not consider that threat as binding him to peace in the mean time, for as if to show me that he was not yet satiated with blood, he had murdered Clerval immediately after the enunciation of his threats. I resolved, therefore, that if my immediate union with my cousin would conduce either to hers or my father's happiness, my adversary's designs against my life should not retard it a single hour' (p.460).
- 22 'As I read,' the creature informs Victor, 'I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition' (p.395). Unable to calculate his own share in it, the creature is naturally unable to distinguish the artificial from the real, and thus absorbs the literary as the actual: 'But *Paradise Lost* excited different and far deeper emotions. I read it, as I had read the other volumes which had fallen into my hands, as a true history. It moved every feeling of wonder and awe that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting. I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. 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, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.' (p.396)
- 23 'I have copies of these letters,' the creature tells Victor when first we hear of these particular documents, 'for I found means, during my residence in the hovel, to procure the implements of writing; and the letters were often in the hands of Felix or Agatha. Before I depart I will give them to you; they will prove the truth of my tale; but at present, as the sun is already far declined, I shall only have time to repeat the substance of them to you.' (p.389).

So the creature virtually teaches himself to write in order to join in the general obsession with transcription and certification; but as these letters never arrive (and as that final play on 'substance' suggests) reference to them simply contributes to the increasing sense of insubstantiality in this text.