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Patch Works
Frankenstein's Monster and the Stitching of Texts

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We are all patchwork, and so shapeless and diverse in composition that each bit, each moment plays its own game. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others.

– Michel de Montaigne[1]

'Oh, mother,' said Maggie, in a vehemently cross tone, 'I don't want to do my patchwork.'
'What! Not your pretty patchwork, to make a counterpane for your aunt Glegg?'
'It's foolish work,' said Maggie, with a toss of her mane, 'tearing things to pieces to sew'em together again. And I don't want to do anything for my aunt Glegg. I don't like her.'.

– George Elliot[2]

Forgive me, kind Reader, for carrying the Metaphor too high; by which means I am out of my Sphere, and so can say nothing of the Male Patch-Workers; for my high Flight in Favour of the Ladies, made a mere Icarus of me, melted my Wings, and tumbled me Headlong down, I know not where.

– Jane Barker[3]

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[1] Montaigne, Michel. 1985. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne.*Translated by Donald M. Frame. Stanford: Stanford UP. 244.
[2] Eliot, George. 1860. *The Mill on the Floss.* Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz. 11.
[3] Barker, Jane. 1723. *A Patch-Work Screen for the Ladies; or, Love and Virtue*. London: E. Curll. vi.

1 The Fabric of Fiction: *Frankenstein* as Source Material

Since it opened its dull yellow eyes to the world and drew a first rattling breath on the pages of the anonymously published novel of 1818, Frankenstein's monster has undergone a great deal of modification and mutation, perhaps also misrepresentation and mutilation. The decade following the first publication of *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* saw "no less than five adaptations for the stage" (see Holmes 2012: 191), early manifestations of the busily branching paths of plays, films, comic books, and cartoons Mary Shelley's materials would take and in which the monster would live on.[4] In a way, this spreading of the story into a multitude of popular narratives and imaginings, its crossover into the public domain, into collective memory and myth, what J. Paul Hunter describes as an outgrowing of the novel and an invasion of other art forms (see Hunter 2012: ix), is Victor Frankenstein's worst fear come true: Even though he destroys the unfinished female companion his creature demanded, the monster has procreated – in various and varying forms, through changes made to it and charges made against it – it persists and multiplies. Many popular renditions of Shelley's *Frankenstein* seem to foreground a struggle between the 'good' scientist and his 'evil' creature, the scandalous transgression of Victor Frankenstein's experiment and the creature's speechless anger and violent monstrosity. There are also adaptations which focus on other aspects of Shelley's story. Some critically acclaimed and thematically complex contemporary works that continue to engage with Shelley's novel concentrate on some of *Frankenstein*'s less popularised yet greatly significant concerns like the connection between monstrosity and femininity which Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar highlight in "Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve" or the monstrosity of specifically female autobiography and authorship that Barbara Johnson elucidates in "My Monster/My Self".

One very recent example to consider in this regard is Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein: A Love Story*, which was longlisted for the Booker Prize 2019[5] and hailed by reviewers as a greatly skilful homage to Shelley's novel[6]. Winterson's

[4] For an overview of different adaptations of Frankenstein see Smith, Andrew ed. 2016. *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 173–255.

[5] *thebookerprizes.com* <https://thebookerprizes.com/resources/media/pressreleases/2019-booker-prize-longlist-announced> (accessed Sept. 10, 2020)

[6] See Seaman, Donna. 2019. "Frankissstein." *Booklist* 116.2: p. 20; see also Booth, Rosemary. 2020. "Mary Shelley in the Age of A.I." *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 27. 2: p. 40.

text is a palpably postmodern piece, consciously employing intertextual and metafictional techniques to deal, among others, with issues of monstrosity, female authorship, perception and reality, subjectivity and gender identity. It can be described as a patchwork of oddly incoherent and at the same time intensely corresponding narrative pieces. These consist of episodes from three alternating narrative strands, the first of which is a portrait of the historical author Shelley and the writing process of *Frankenstein*, the second a re-imagination of her signature literary work in which a protagonist with her name features as Frankenstein's lover, and the third a fusion of historical and fictional realities in which Shelley the author and Frankenstein her character meet.[7] Changing back and forth between factually founded and fictitious elements which are stitched together by recurring characters, themes, motifs, and scenes alluding to, as well as passages directly quoting from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Winterson's novel playfully deconstructs differentiations between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of a literary work, 'real' and 'fictional' world, 'creator' and 'creation'.

Some years earlier, in 1995, artist and author Shelley Jackson created a stir with her hypertext novel[8] *The Patchwork Girl; or, a Modern Monster* which incorporates passages of text from Shelley's novel and narrates the completion of Frankenstein's unfinished female monster by Mary Shelley herself. However, *The Patchwork Girl* was noted and discussed by critics predominantly because of its then cutting-edge digital form, which was predicted by some to eventually replace the paper book (see Hackman 2011: 84), and because of its specific non-linear and fragmentary narrative structure.[9] Jackson's work was published on a CD-ROM and has multiple possible starting points that can be navigated by readers clicking either on the words of an on-screen title page which leads into one of five sections text or on demarcated areas of two different graphics:

[7] Much like in Shelley's novel, creator and creation come face to face, with the sole difference that in *Frankenstein* the creature demands that Frankenstein make it a companion, in *Frankissstein* Frankenstein demands to be unmade.

[8] "'First-generation' hypertext novels are largely characterized by their creation before the popularization of browsers for the World Wide Web. These novels exist on CD-ROMs or floppy disks that are sold much like a book would be. Coover describes these initial attempts at creating 'a new literary art form' as 'the Golden Age' of literary hypertext […]" (Hackman 2011: 85)

[9] For a more detailed discussion of the structure and story of *The Patchworkgirl* see Hackman 2011: 90–92.

> Even before the title page appears, an image comes up entitled "her," displaying a woman's body against a black ground. Traversing the body are multiple dotted lines, as if the body were a crazy quilt of scars or seams; retrospectively the reader can identify this image as representing the female monster's patched body, among other possible referents. […] Linked to "her" is "phrenology," a graphic that further performs the metaphoric overlay of body and text. Showing a massive head in profile, "phrenology" displays the brain partitioned by lines into a crazy quilt of women's names and enigmatic phrases. When we click on the names, we are taken to lexias telling the women's stories from whose parts the monster was assembled; clicking on the phrases takes us to lexias that meditate on the nature of "her" multiple subjectivities. Thus we enter these textual blocks through a bodily image, implying that the text lies within the represented body. (Hayles 2000: 9f.)

In a medium-specific analysis of hypertext and a close reading of *The Patchwork Girl*, N. Kathrine Hayles explains how Jackson's text explores and contests notions of a stable and unified subjectivity, notions of originality and the author as "autonomous creator" and that "feminine associations with sewing serve to mark this as a female – and feminist – production" (2000: 12). As Paul Hackman notes, "many critics read *Patchwork Girl* as a meditation on the fragmented nature of human subjectivity, particularly female subjectivity, a meditation enhanced by the multiple reading paths characteristic of hypertext" and almost unanimously agree "that the most notable feature of the text is the correspondence between the medium and the message" (Hackman 2011: 85).

The works of Winterson and Jackson share an engagement with postmodern and feminist ideas and theories and a deep concern with unstable subjectivity, literary production, specifically female authorship, and monstrosity. Both *Frankissstein* and *The Patchwork Girl* break with conventions of form and narrative structure, both are highly self-reflexive and metafictional works (admittedly, Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* much more radically so), and both find the material by help of which they create and formulate their respective projects in Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Why is it that two contemporary, critical, feminist, and experimental authors choose this particular two-hundred-year-old text? What is it they find in it?

The story of *Frankenstein* is enjoying such continuous cultural engagement, according to Hunter, "only because its origins in the novel itself are so richly

suggestive and evocative of larger issues and so resonant about the ambition and fallings-short of the human condition" (Hunter 2012: ix). This is certainly true. *Frankenstein* is also richly suggestive and evocative specifically of questions of gender as, for example, the readings of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, or of Barbara Johnson argue. These questions, the gender ambiguity of the monster and the literary encoding of a female autobiography, are likely a thematic aspect that attracts Jackson and Winterson to Shelley's materials. But what if, in addition to the concern with female authorship, identity and sexuality, in addition to the connection between textuality, femininity and monstrosity, in addition to an interest in the relation between creator and creation, they also find inspiration in *Frankenstein* when it comes to the correspondence of message or content and form which is produced in the self-reflexive, playfully or – in Jackson's case – radically fragmentary patchwork mode of literary production and conception? Is this textile mode palpable in Shelley's novel? Is not the monster in the novel, which Victor Frankenstein puts together from the limbs and organs of dead bodies, itself a patchwork? Perhaps, story and monster singularly offer themselves up to endless reworkings, because they never were complete to begin with, not in the sense of being a closed, self-contained system of fixed, homogenous elements. They are both ambiguously multiple in their meaning, disjointed, visibly pieced together, patchworks. Is thus the patchwork form pioneered both in the composition of the body of Shelley's text and the body of the monster?

A cursory look at the well-documented history of the text's formation may offer first evidence: From the initial idea during the famous stay at Lake Geneva, and the first pages of the original core story, which would be elaborated and extended at all ends to become a manuscript that would again pass through several stages of editing, to the novel's publication in 1818 and the revised version in 1831, *Frankenstein* itself emerges by means of a procedure of collecting, re-using and re-evaluating, of combination and conjunction, of cutting out, adding in, and sewing up disparate parts, sections, fractions and scraps, clippings and cuttings, patches.

What is more, the text itself incorporates a rich array of references to and quotations from other works of literature. Such allusive or intertextual gestures, as Hunter remarks, were a familiar practice among Shelley's contemporaries. He specifies their effect of inviting readers "to notice the borrowings and celebrate their

own skills of knowing, noticing, and seeing the relevance" (Hunter 2012: xvi). However, the deliberate use of intertextuality in *Frankenstein* aims at more than mere ornamentation and flattery. I want to argue that it feeds into a larger project of the novel, which is to say the dramatization of a particular mode of creative production, one that operates through a de- and reintegration of elements and a deliberate disorientation amid shifting structures of parts and whole, patches and work. By bringing to attention a dependence on pre-existing materials Shelley enters into discourses on original genius and decidedly positions herself and her novel against the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, proposing a model of literary production that emphasises the artificial instead of the organic by leaving seams, stitches and patches visible.

Thus, by sharing the monster's fundamental compositional quality, the text shares its monstrosity, too. According to Shelley herself, who calls her own work "hideous progeny" (2012: 169) in the Introduction to the third print edition of *Frankenstein*, the text *is* the monster. And the monster is the text, because it functions as a self-reflexive metaphor – its creation in the novel showcases the creation of that novel – as commentators like Chris Baldick and Charles E. Robinson have noted (2012: 175; 2012: 199). An observation that stands even more to reason when consulting Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)", in which he unfolds: "A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' 'that which warns,' a glyph that seeks a hierophant" (Cohen 1996: 4). Both monster and text demand critical attention, they work by an alternation of correspondence and contradiction, they hold information, yet elude immediate comprehension, therefore they require closer analysis and interpretation.

I propose to approach them precisely as such, as textile text and patchwork, and to conceive of patchwork as a compositional principle of monstrosity, a narrative strategy, and a poetological model, in which Mary Shelley – by suggesting this textile technique for the fabrication of fiction – rejects ideas of universal knowledge and truth and anticipates relativistic, pluralistic positions of postmodernism, as well as offers a particularly female mode of cultural production. That contemporary authors like Shelley Jackson and Jeanette Winterson who are pursuing feminist and deconstructivist projects in their writing and transgressing,

or altogether abandoning in the case of Jackson, narrative norms, refer back to the materials of *Frankenstein* strengthens the assumption that the 1818 text holds certain templates ready to be re-used, trails threads that can be taken up, and provides patches that can be taken out or added to. What are those templates? What kind of patches do we encounter in *Frankenstein*? And what is it that makes a text textile? What makes it a patchwork?

1.1 Textile Texts and Female Cultural Production

The affiliation of the textile and the text is both ordinary and ancient, proceeding from the Latin participial stem of *texĕre* – to weave.[10] Metaphors of text as woven material or spun fabric, pervade literature and literary criticism.

One of the most prominent examples of woven fabric as text may be found in the Greek myth of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela[11], relayed in the sixth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and figuring as a central reference in Shakespeare's tragedy *Titus Andronicus*. Philomela is raped by her travel companion and supposed protector Tereus, who afterwards cuts out her tongue to render her silent. Determined to have her revenge, Philomela weaves a tapestry depicting the atrocity that befell her, thus managing to communicate the story to her sister Procne and thus identify the abuser. The tapestry provides a medium for the expression of a female voice, that would otherwise have remained mute. Its making illustrates the intersection between practices of textile production and narration.

The textual quality of textiles can be found perhaps even more pronouncedly in another of the Ovidian stories, namely the one of Arachne[12]. An immensely talented weaver, Arachne angers the goddess of handicraft, Athena, by boasting of her unparalleled skill. They enter a competition of weaving, from which Arachne emerges the superior contestant and is consequently transformed into a spider by the jealous goddess. Notably, the tapestry produced by Athena pictures a power order of the world with the gods as rightful rulers of an indisputably just cosmology, whereas Arachne's tapestry details numerous sexploits of the gods and their

[10] *OED = The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2000–. Ed. John A. Simpson. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.<https://www.oed.com> (accessed Aug. 26, 2020).
[11] See Ovid. 1986. *Ovid: Metamorphoses.* Eds. A. D. Melville and E. J. Kenney. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP. 134–142. (*Oxford Scholarly Editions Online*, 1 Jul. 2015. Web. 1 Jul. 2015.)
[12] See ibid. 121–125.

infamous disregard of mortal women's consent or lack thereof. As a punishment Arachne is to become an epitome of the activity she has always prided herself on – a web-weaving spider. As obvious a punchline of a malicious divine joke as that may be, there is additional significance to be derived from Arachne's metamorphosis. If she emerges as embodiment and archetype of what she already was and this happens to manifest itself in the frightfully grotesque body of an arthropod, one may conclude that this second characteristic of the animal, its horrifying effect, its monstrosity, was already inherent to Arachne's being and doings. And indeed, her work of exposing injustice and the suffering of women is monstrous in the implications it carries and the unsettling effect it has on the established order of things and divine claims of authority. The tale of Arachne is placed programmatically at the beginning of the sixth book of the *Metamorphoses*, serving as *mise en abyme* for the poet's textile/textual work and its subversive potential.

1.2 What Constitutes a Patchwork?

'Patchwork' is a peculiarly flexible term. It can be characterized by the main quality of what it describes: incoherence. The *OED* firstly lists 'patchwork' as "Something composed of many different pieces or elements"[13]. While this initial and essential definition can be considered neutral, the entry continues to qualify: "esp. when put together in a makeshift or incongruous way; a medley or jumble"[14]. This specification carries certain connotations of the provisional, poorly made, that is produced out of necessity and lack of better means, as well as suggesting a negative aesthetic evaluation such as ragged, unsightly, ugly. Yet, 'patchwork' also describes artfully arranged patterns, carefully crafted textiles, cloth or clothing regarded as highly decorative and fashionable. This second variant of meaning evokes, quite contrary to the former, decidedly positive associations with beauty, craftwork, art and a more comfortable social status of the maker, wearer or owner. 'Patchwork' is thus doubly contradictory, both as signifier and as signified.

[13] *OED = The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2000–. Ed. John A. Simpson. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.<https://www.oed.com> (accessed Jul. 9, 2020).
[14] *OED = The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2000–. Ed. John A. Simpson. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.<https://www.oed.com> (accessed Jul. 9, 2020).

In addition to this mismatch in meaning, the word 'patchwork' may be used as noun or verb[15] and therefore describe both the process of creating and the creation. An interrelation between the product made and the making of it presents itself not only linguistically but also in the actual object. Notably, unlike a clock, for example, with the cogs and springs hidden inside the casing, or a clay vessel, which we know must have been moulded but cannot conclude this by visible traces (unless a careless potter left a fingerprint), or – to return to a textile example – a woven fabric, in which the threads interlace so systematically and tightly that there is no discerning beginnings or ends, unlike such products of craftsmanship, the finished patchwork plainly exhibits *that* it was put together and *how*: the dissimilarity of the patches and the visibility of the seams connecting them points to their being assembled and sewn together. Thus, in semiotic terms, any patchwork has an indexical relationship to the mode of its production.

The patchwork retains a liminal position between production and completion, fragmentation and integration. Within itself it both produces meaningful relations and calls them into question: How do the parts relate to the whole? How do they relate to each other? What happens when they are taken out of their original context and placed into a new one? Does it matter where they are placed? How do they complement or contradict the pieces next to them? Do they retain the effect of their own pattern within a larger one? Does a piece of text retain its original meaning in any context? Can something that is made from human body parts be regarded human?

2 Tracing the Threads: (Dis)locating Beginnings in *Frankenstein*

"Every thing must have a beginning, to speak in Sanchean phrase; and that beginning must be linked to something that went before", Mary Shelley writes in her 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein* (Shelley 2012: 167). This statement concerns the development of the idea for and Shelley's writing of the novel. She formulates a comment on literary creation and originality, but also speaks to a more fundamental epistemological and narratological problem: the necessity and simultaneous impossibility of fixing a definite beginning. Formally, the telling of a

[15] The verb, like the noun can be used in a more abstract sense ("to assemble haphazardly, to cobble together.") or specifically refer to a textile technique ("To create a patchwork assembling pieces of fabric." See *OED = The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2000–. Ed. John A. Simpson. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.<https://www.oed.com> (accessed Jul. 9, 2020).

story (*syuzhet*) must begin at a certain determinate point – with the first word, sentence, section that is spoken or written. In terms of content, however, that beginning might not relate the chronological beginning, the actual earliest point of the events covered within the story (*fabula*).[16]

The issue and the roots of this theoretical differentiation reach back to antiquity. Aristotle in his *Poetics*, after stating with initial certainty that "[a] beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else" (Aristotle 2005: 56), later finds himself obliged to admit to the complication of offstage events, that take place prior to the action of a drama, and must thus acknowledge the fact that, as Brian Richardson puts it, "establishing the precise point where the narrative begins may be less simple than his earlier formulation suggests" (2008: 7). On the other hand, Horace, another early commentator on beginnings, praises Homer for beginning the telling of the *Illiad* "in the middle of the story, in medias res, rather than from the strict beginning; […] with the wrath of Achilles near the end of the Trojan War, not with Leda's egg (ab ovo) from which Helen emerged" (Richardson 2008: 7).

Yet despite Aristotle's admission, Horace's praise and many examples of narratives beginning *in medias res*, seemingly just as many stories stage their beginnings in the first uncomplicated Aristotelian sense. Disregarding all the embarrassments which necessarily arise when one aspires to fix an absolute, true beginning, the idea of it has persisted in literature. One famous advocate of this potent phantasm may be found in Lord Byron, who, consciously and provocatively distancing himself from Horace, declares in his *Don Juan* that he would "begin at the beginning" (*Don Juan* 1.7.2). A phrase, which Niels Buch Leander exposes as "at best a useless tautology" by arguing that a beginning is inextricably linked to and always already part of a narrative: "[…] a beginning requires a supporting narrative, which can describe the beginning *as* event" (Leander 2008: 19). Mary Shelley seems to take the same line with her initially quoted reflection on the relativity of beginnings. Why is she, unlike Byron, distancing herself and her work from any claim of totality? What is the rationale for framing *Frankenstein* thus, by unsettling the very idea of beginnings and pointing out their arbitrary

[16] "Fabula: (also referred to as 'story' or '*histoire*' the events of a narrative." (Bennet and Royle 2009: 322)

constructedness? Does the novel address the set of problems that unfolds from Shelley's introductory statement – and if so, how? As we shall see, the numerous beginnings of *Frankenstein* can be productively conceptualised as part of a literary patchwork in which their status as beginning becomes uncertain.

Before turning to this and in order to gain an understanding of the way beginnings as a concept are treated in *Frankenstein*, we first should ask how the novel itself begins, or rather, before that, when and where it begins. A question which, as Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle point out, "raises a series of fundamental problems in literary criticism and theory" (Bennett and Royle 2009: 1):

> Does a text begin as the author puts his or her first mark on a piece of paper or keys in the first word on a computer? Does it begin with the first idea about a story or poem, or in the childhood of the writer, for instance? Or does the text only begin as the reader picks up the book? Does the text begin with its title, or with the first word of the so-called 'body' of the text? (Bennett and Royle 2009: 1)

These questions are also raised by Mary Shelley's introduction to the novel as well as within the novel, that is to say the body of the narrative text, which precisely does not "begin at the beginning" (as Byron would have it) but rather, as I will argue, repeatedly displaces, reiterates and performs different variants of discursive practices and narrative strategies of beginning. It must be recognised at this point, particularly with respect to issues addressed by Bennett and Royle, that what Gérard Genette terms *paratexts* (e.g. the author's name, title, subtitle, epitaph, introduction, preface, author's note etc.) and identifies as "thresholds" (see Genette 1997: 1f.), as both demarcation and junction between the inside and outside of a text, would merit an extended discussion and yield many other interesting aspects to consider in a discussion of the beginnings of Shelley's novel.[17] For the objective of my argument, however, I will focus on the narrative beginnings of what in differentiation to the paratexts will for simplicity's sake be called the body of the text, even though one

[17] For instance, the authors name, was not from the beginning at the beginning, that is on the title page of the book: The first edition of *Frankenstein* was published anonymously, and the first preface aims at the pretension of the novel being written by a man (it was actually written by Percy Shelley). (see Hunter 2012: 5n1)

could justifiably object that all paratextual elements are just as much part of that textual body.

Three distinct first-person narratives make up the body of the *Frankenstein* text: the first is that of captain Walton, which precedes that of Victor Frankenstein, which precedes that of the monster. Therefore, the novel's structure alone reveals a beginning before a beginning before a beginning. From a compositional angle, the connection to Shelley's introductory comment may thus seem to be swiftly identified and explained. But if something must always come before, what precedes the first of the three beginnings? Is the beginning of the telling congruent with the beginning of the story? And if the text truly is to keep in line with Shelley's observation, shouldn't these beginnings figure and function in a way to *not* be beginnings at the same time as being beginnings?

I want to propose that the beginnings in *Frankenstein* both by themselves (either deliberately or involuntarily) disclose their own precarious status as a beginning and that in relation to each other (and by an interplay of complementation and contradiction) they also challenge one another's strategies of beginning. I further would like to suggest that by laying out these different openings, Mary Shelley is producing a narrative patchwork. Like its textile prototype this narrative patchwork unsettles any certainty of origin by de- and recontextualising the components it consists of. *The* beginning of one narrative patch gives way to *a* beginning among many in view of the whole patchwork. The following analysis will work its way along the three narrative openings according to the reading order in which they occur. In a second step, after examining what strategies are employed to configure them as beginnings and which indications of a 'before' can be observed coincidentally, I bring the collected evidence together in order to consider the combined effects of the multiple narrative strands and their respective styles and strategies of beginning.

2.1 Repeated Patterns: Multiple Beginnings in *Frankenstein*

The body of the *Frankenstein* text commences with a letter. It is the first of four, addressed to Mrs. Saville in England, as the heading states, and written by her brother, Captain Robert Walton, as becomes clear in the subsequent passages and pages. Without formal or familiar greeting, without introduction of himself as

sender/narrator, only having specified date and place ("St. Petersburgh, Dec. 11th, 17–"), Walton puts pen to paper and writes the first sentence of his letter and the novel: "You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings" (Shelley 2012: 7). Thus, the novel opens ambiguously with a message that gestures both to what lies ahead – an apparently dubious enterprise that promises the unfurling of yet uncertain events as well as the presumed future reaction of his addressee – and refers back to what came before. Some disagreement about this enterprise seems to have taken place and it was launched, nonetheless. At the beginning of *Frankenstein* lies a journey already begun. Such doubling of prospect-retrospect is repeated in the next sentence: "I arrived here yesterday; and my first task is to assure my dear sister of my welfare, and increasing confidence in the success of my undertaking" (Shelley 2012: 7). Walton's arrival, temporally located in the "yesterday", is juxtaposed with his current "first" task, as well as the futurity of the pending "undertaking". The syntactic transition from the past tense of "I arrived here yesterday" to the present tense of "and my first task is to assure my dear sister of my welfare" (Shelley 2012: 7) reinforces the in-between position of a beginning that exhibits both foundational and subsequent qualities.

The goal of Walton's undertaking is to reach the north pole, to discover "the wondrous power which attracts the needle" and the lands of "eternal light" (Shelley 2012: 7). These lands, supposedly the location of a lost paradise, were much sought by voyagers of discovery in Shelley's time, as numerous travel accounts from contemporary periodicals attest (see Hunter 2012: 8n2). Therefore, precedent to the beginning of Walton's account lie not only the implied travel preparations, conversations with Margaret Saville and the actual outset of the journey, but also an already established narrative tradition and genre, in which the narrator is well-versed:

> This expedition has been the favourite dream of my early years. I have read with ardour the accounts of the various voyages which have been made in the prospect of arriving at the North Pacific Ocean through the seas which surround the pole. You may remember, that a history of all the voyages made for purposes of discovery composed the whole of our good uncle Thomas's library. My education was neglected, yet I was passionately fond of reading. These volumes were my

> study day and night, and my familiarity with them increased that regret which I had felt, as a child, on learning that my father's dying injunction had forbidden my uncle to allow me to embark in a sea-faring life. (Shelley 2012: 8)

The reminiscence discloses the source(s) of Walton's idea and desire for such an expedition, but more importantly an elementary condition for telling stories – a pre-existent knowledge of stories, of narrative forms, genres, conventions that one can then either adhere to or oppose. Before Walton, the adventurer, and Walton, the narrator, came Walton, the ardent reader of travel journals. It is the first of several instances in the novel in which a fundamental dependence on intertextuality is acknowledged, tying into Mary Shelley's introductory protestations of the conditionality of literary creation, as well as into a larger project of the novel: to comment on concepts of originality and genius. For the moment, I will leave this particular claim a thread trailing; the next chapter shall take it up again and follow up on its implications.

As it turns out, any anticipation of an account of travel adventure and geographical discovery that the first pages of *Frankenstein* might kindle will, be disappointed, however. Instead, Walton's narrative serves to prepare the way to the central plot which famously dramatises another, scientifically ground-breaking discovery – of the secret of life. As Walton proceeds to describe the ship's hazardous navigation through the Arctic Ocean, it steers toward a second beginning within the novel, that of the embedded narrative of Victor Frankenstein. Having gained a distant glimpse of some mysterious, man-shaped being journeying northward on a dog sledge, Walton and his crew encounter a second unlikely traveller, who, likewise, has been travelling by sledge but now finds himself in a precarious position, floating on a fragment of ice. Frankenstein is in a frightful state of exhaustion and hypothermia when he is taken on board the vessel and must be nursed back to a reasonable state of health before he offers to share his story with the captain, who like his crew had been wondering for days how a man on a sledge came to be this far north in apparent pursuit of the mysteriously large other figure they had spotted (see Shelley 2012: 13).

Contrary to the relatively abrupt opening of Walton's epistolary writing, Victor Frankenstein is introduced and externally characterised, even eulogised, by Walton, before he emerges as the successive first-person narrator. And

interestingly, the earliest description of Frankenstein rests upon a negation of Otherness: “He was not, as the other traveller seemed to be, a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island, but an European” (Shelley 2012: 14). Frankenstein is thus marked to belong to the political and ideological centre of power, placed in a category which especially to a readership of the early nineteenth century would have held great significance and conveyed a sense of his probable reliability and authority in opposition to the yet unknown, supposedly untrustworthy “savage” whom he is tracking.

As Walton proceeds to elaborate his impression of Frankenstein, he observes melancholy and despair, yet especially emphasises his simultaneous kindness, sweetness, and benevolence (see Shelley 2012: 14f.). And while noting a hint of madness in Frankenstein’s eyes, Walton is chiefly impressed with the man’s impeccable manners and excellent education. “He must have been a noble creature in his better days, being even now in wreck so attractive and amiable”, the enraptured Captain writes (Shelley 2012: 16). In almost delirious admiration, he elevates Frankenstein’s introspective broodings to a supernatural status:

> Such a man has a double existence: he may suffer misery, and be overwhelmed by disappointments; yet when he has retired into himself, he will be like a celestial spirit, that has a halo around him, within whose circle no grief or folly ventures. (Shelley 2012: 17)

Taken together, Walton’s descriptions of the “divine wanderer” (Shelley 2012: 17) are highly evocative of eighteenth and nineteenth century conceptions of genius, as will become more apparent and relevant in the following chapter. For now it may suffice to record that William Duff in *An Essay on Original Genius* – at the time one of the seminal works on the topic – typecast genius as possessing an exceptional imagination, great power of judgement, as well as “acute intellect; and an exquisite sensibility and refinement of taste” (Duff 1767: 20). In addition to the other markers of prestige, education and power that Walton attaches to the figure of Frankenstein, the overall resonance of his characterisation with the much-idolized figure of a genius further aids to anchor all claims of reliability and authority Frankenstein makes as a narrator.

What is more, before the telling of Frankenstein's tale can begin in earnest, he delivers an opening speech – another beginning before a beginning – placed at the end of the letter section and Walton's first-person narration, in which Frankenstein lays final, definite claim on the auctorial and authoritative position he will thereupon assume.

> You may easily perceive, Captain Walton, that I have suffered great and unparalleled misfortunes. I had determined, once, that the memory of these evils should die with me; but you have won me to alter my determination. You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been. I do not know that the relation of my misfortunes will be useful to you, yet if you are inclined, listen to my tale. I believe that the strange incidents connected with it will afford a view of nature, which may enlarge your faculties and understanding. You will hear of powers and occurrences, such as you have been accustomed to believe impossible: but I do not doubt that my tale conveys in its series internal evidence of the truth of the events of which it is composed. (Shelley 2012, 17)

In those five sentences Frankenstein performs a variety of rhetorical gestures (almost all of which the beginning of Walton's narrative lacks) which correspond to several of the typical prefatorial functions Gérard Genette identifies in *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation*.[18] After a formal establishing of the narrative situation (Frankenstein as auto-narrator, Walton as addressee), the speech encompasses a *capta benevolentiae* ("if you are inclined"), an emphasis on the importance of the subject and its intellectual usefulness ("will afford a view of nature, which may enlarge your faculties and understanding"), an insistence on the novelty, or in this case extraordinariness of the materials ("strange incidents", "powers and occurrences, such as you have been accustomed to believe impossible"), and lastly an assurance of truthfulness ("internal evidence of the truth of the events") (see Genette 1997: 198–200; 206). Noteworthy here, is the affected nature of the appeal for the listener's favour and the rather feigned modesty of doubt, which is immediately revoked in the next sentence, when Frankenstein explains the

[18] Gérard Genette distinguishes six functional types: (1) original authorial preface; (2) original authorial postface; (3) the later authorial preface (or postface); (4) the delayed authorial preface or postface; (5) authentic allographic (and actorial) preface; (6) fictional prefaces (see Genette 1997: 196)

intellectual value of his story.[19] Furthermore, by linking investigative ambition to the "serpent to sting you" in an allusion to the biblical myth of origin and the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, the listener (and the reader) has already been led to expect a cautionary tale, one of transgression with catastrophic consequence and thus a tale of moral value. The trope of paradise from Walton's first letter is both echoed and drastically shifted from prospective gain to retrospective failure. Whereas the first beginning promised adventurous search for paradise, the second forebodes a story of its loss.

And so, Frankenstein begins, and so, Chapter I[20] of the novel begins. "I am by birth a Genevese; and my family is one of the most distinguished of that republic" (Shelley 2012: 18), Frankenstein proclaims, brimming with certainty and self-confidence. To begin at birth seems obvious, the 'natural' choice for the story of one's life and has thus ever been a favourite opening strategy of autobiographical narratives. It is, however, considered more closely, much less natural and unproblematic. After all, no one can remember and narrate their own birth, let alone any events leading up to it, a fact which is most famously ironised in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Nonetheless, Frankenstein falls back on information about his family's past, his father's thoughts and feelings, as well as his parents' meeting, all of which he can only have obtained second-hand yet presents matter-of-factly and (unlike Sterne's Shandy) without any hint of irony, in the stance of an omniscient narrator.

> My ancestors had been for many years counsellors and syndics; and my father had filled several public situations with honour and reputation. He was respected by all who knew him for his integrity and indefatigable attention to public business. He had passed his younger days perpetually occupied by the affairs of his country; and it was not until the decline of life that he thought of marrying, and bestowing on the state sons who might carry his virtues and his name down to posterity. (Shelley 2012: 18)

[19] As we shall shortly see, this is particularly relevant in contrast to the less formal, narrative stance the monster takes, which is arguably constructed to seem more authentic than that of Frankenstein.
[20] That the first Chapter, which would commonly be expected to mark the beginning of a novel's narrative, is positioned after Walton's letter section can in itself be regarded as a showcasing of belated beginnings or a beginning linked to something that went before.

The beginning of Frankenstein's narrative is concerned with beginnings, or to be precise, origins in the form of lineage and ancestry. Also, the detailing of his well-situated, well-respected, politically influential family affirms Walton's preludial observations and praises. Adding to that, it reinforces Frankenstein's claim of authority that the text has built up to this point. While distinct stylistic differences between Walton's and Frankenstein's narration in form, tone, purpose, and genre must be noted, in many respects they clearly correspond to and cooperate with each other to produce an interdependent impression of reliability and authority. I took care to outline this dynamic because it starkly contrasts with the presentation and beginning of the novel's third, innermost, the monster's first-person narrative.

Last to speak and least sympathetically presented beforehand,[21] the creature Frankenstein has shaped, awoken, and then abandoned makes no claims of absolute reliability or a completeness of its account. As it enters its narrative, no assured first-person-pronoun towers at the beginning of the sentence like when Frankenstein had started to speak as narrator. Nor, indeed, does it begin by nominating the "you" with which Walton opens in his letter and which, even with the narrator not immediately being identifiable himself, in having an addressee also connotes a clear speaker position. Instead, and before anything else, the monster signals uncertainty: "It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original æra of my being: all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct" (Shelley 2012:70). There is, of course, no grand lineage, no heritage, hometown or country that the monster *can* refer to. But to begin, as it does, with the ignorance of its own beginnings and background is by no means an inevitable starting point. After all, the monster could have begun before the beginning of its own existence, like its creator. While there are no family members that might have recounted anecdotes of past events for the narrator to then present orderly and self-evidently as Frankenstein does, the monster has learnt of its own origins and the circumstances that led to its creation before beginning to tell its story. Once able to read, it studied Frankenstein's journal which by chance was stored in some clothes the creature took from the laboratory: "You minutely described in these papers every step you took in the progress of your work; this history was mingled with

[21] Having been described as both physically revolting and dangerous as well as displaced further into otherness from the category of non-European suggested by Walton to the category of non-human by Frankenstein.

accounts of domestic occurrences" (Shelley 2012: 90). At the time of the telling of the story, the monster is in possession of this information. It could, therefore, assume a stance and style aligning much more closely to that of Frankenstein. It could, we might imagine for a moment, begin its story somewhere along the lines of this: 'I am not born, but made. My creator, a man of most exceptional skill and mental capacities, had the most noble of goals in mind, when he set out on the project of bringing me into existence and moulding me in the shape of man.' Yet such a mirroring would defeat the intricate game with narrative perspectives and conventions Shelley's novel sets up.

Instead, and in what must – especially in contrast with the alternative possibilities demonstrated in the two preceding accounts – be considered Shelley's conscious narrative choice, the monster admits to faulty memory, profound ignorance of circumstance and context, as well as a lack of any form of language or means of conceptualisation.

> A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt, at the same time; and it was indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses. By degrees, I remember, a stronger light pressed upon my nerves, so that I was obliged to shut my eyes. Darkness then came over me, and troubled me; but hardly had I felt this, when by opening my eyes, as I now suppose, the light poured in upon me again. (Shelley 2012: 70)

With the qualification "As I now suppose" the monster points precisely to a fact of auto-narrative situations, which complicates Frankenstein's previous presentation of his family's backstory, yet had not been made explicit at all by his beginning: There is in general, but emerging especially pronounced in the monster's telling, a distinction to be made between the 'experiencing I' and the 'narrating I'. The former is part of the story world and limited to the knowledge and experience or in the monster's case the profound ignorance and inexperience it has at the time, whereas the latter, situated at the end of living and the beginning of telling the story, can access all and any information obtained and then actively decide how to order it, whether to present it chronologically or whether to put some of it forward in advance for explanation, as well as hold certain facts back to increase suspense. The monster as 'narrating I' repeatedly signals distance to the 'experiencing I', for example when it recalls the first time it heard Felix read aloud: ("[…] but at that

time I knew nothing of the science of words or letters" (Shelley 2012: 75)) or when a description of the 'experiencing I's' agony over its own identity and place in the world is accompanied by the 'narrating I' noting: "Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant" (Shelley 2012: 83).

By recognising this distinction that corresponds to the difference between *fabula* and *syuzhet* the monster exhibits a self-reflexive awareness of the narrator's role in retrospectively composing and shaping a story. Rather than embracing the auctorial/authoritative role like Frankenstein does in recourse to the literary convention of a preface, it relativises and problematises any supposed objectivity of this position. It showcases the fact that whatever is told is subject to the narrator's interpretation and retrospective reconstruction, for instance by the cautious formulation of "I now suppose" at the end of the quoted opening passage and also by a hedging parenthesis in the next sentence: "I walked, and, I believe, descended" (Shelley 2012: 70). The act of narration as the creature performs it becomes an act of piecing together fragments into a fabricated whole, that like a patchwork visibly retains its sites of fracture and exposes how they are conjoined when the narrator's presumptions stitch across gaps and mismatching textures. A distorted and confused perception, faulty memory, and doubts about the definite truth of what is being told – if not openly discussed and reflected upon by the narrator – might be taken as signs of unreliability. In the case of Frankenstein's monster, arguably, the deliberate admittance of insecurity and subjectivity and therein the exhibition of the narrative's patchwork quality and the showcasing of the stitches holding it together achieve the opposite effect and produce an impression of authenticity and a reassurance of sincerity.

Because of the position from which the monster speaks, it must attempt to signal sincerity by other means than simply proclaiming the truth of its tale like Frankenstein does. It cannot rely on reputation or status to strengthen its believability as narrator. What is more, having been marked earlier on by Walton as savage Other, in the course of Frankenstein's narrative it is further displaced from the category of non-European to non-human. And unlike the two preceding narrators, the monster has no willing audience. Having thus far been labelled by Frankenstein "wretch", "miserable monster", and "demonical corpse" (see Shelley 2012: 36) and defined as antagonist, it must fight to be heard when it encounters its

creator. Before the beginning of the monster's tale no formal prefatory speech like Frankenstein's takes place, but rather an intense verbal struggle in which with a mixture of rational argumentation, eloquent pleas, and dire threats it finally persuades Frankenstein to listen at all (see Shelley 2012: 68f.).

What the creature then proceeds to tell is essentially an extreme version of a coming of age story beginning at the point of a pre-lingual, pre-conscious state that conflates what might be imagined as the earliest stages of childhood development and the earliest stages of humanity itself: The monster's existence begins by awaking in a – though disproportionate and misshapen – fully formed adult body, but without and before a sense of self, command of language or any other cognitive means of differentiating and conceptualising surroundings, before any knowledge of the existence of fire, shelter, food, or other living beings. The 'narrating I' makes an admirable attempt to portray the unportrayable and communicate via the medium of language what an existence before language has been like. From nondescript "dark and opaque bodies" (Shelley 2012: 70) the monster's highly overwhelmed senses gradually adjust to making out that for which the 'experiencing I' yet lacks the vocabulary, but readers can understand to be and label as the sun, the moon, and birdsong: "a gentle light stole over the heavens"; "a radiant form rise from among the trees"; "the orb of night had greatly lessened"; "a pleasant sound, which often saluted my ears, proceeded from the throats of the little winged animals who had often intercepted the light from my eyes" (Shelley 2012: 70f.).

The creature's story unfolds its own growth into an individual, the gradual realisation of its Otherness, its unfulfilled yearning for affection and the ill-treatment it has received in various encounters with humans but first and foremost when its creator has abandoned it in a state of what must be considered an infant at mind. That early formative impressions play a considerable role in shaping the narrator was, as we have seen, broached by Walton's ponderings on his childhood reading. To an even greater extent the topic is explored when Frankenstein describes his upbringing, schooling and later a professor's sneering at his youthful pursuit of "useless" authors such as Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus, whom Frankenstein nonetheless admires for their grand ambitions of seeking "immortality and power" and whose ranks he finally joins with the creation of the monster (see

Shelley 2012: 27f.). Neither Frankenstein nor Walton could have become the narrators of their respective stories or begun them as they do without the determinative contexts they refer to in those stories. But the most drastic demonstration of what lies before a narrative beginning, or at least the most consequent retracement of threads leading back from that beginning, takes place in the monster's narrative. Having aimlessly wandered the countryside for some days, the monster is attacked by villagers, flees, and seeks shelter in a hovel adjoining a cottage (see Shelley 2012: 73). From this hiding place it can observe and listen in on the cottage's inhabitants.

> I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers. This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it. (Shelley 2012: 77)

This discovery is followed by a progressive portrayal of the monster's language acquisition and its analogous development of a sense of self and the world, which is further propelled by eavesdropping on Felix, the son of the family in the cottage, who instructs his Arabian lover Safie in Western conventions and traditions. During those lessons, well fitted for the creature who shares a position of Otherness with Safie and is neither part nor at this point aware of dominant discourses, the clandestine student comes to know of "the strange system of human society", "of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty; of rank, descent, and noble blood" as well as "of the difference of sexes; of the birth and growth of children; […] and all the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds" (Shelley 2012: 83f.). Corresponding with the suggestions of the two preceding narratives, but more caefully and elaborately, the monster's narrative explores the subject of a beginning's dependence on predetermined contexts. The 'narrating I' can only set out to tell its story when and because the 'experiencing I' has obtained the abilities and knowledge which are necessary for any meaningful form of communication and narration to take place: an understanding of systems of communication, structuration, differentiation, and classification.

2.2 Beyond Beginnings: Upsetting Patches, Unsettling Frameworks

That last, most pronounced, illustration of the conditionality and the 'before' of beginnings in the text takes us back to the questions that prompted this exploration in the first place: Does the novel address the sort or rather set of problems that unfolds from Shelley's introductory statement? Is it concerned with the paradox of inevitably having to begin somewhere and the potentiality of multiple places to do so? And how is this ambiguity demonstrated and dealt with? When taking account of the evidence we have collected by now it becomes clear that the openings of the three first-person narratives in *Frankenstein* do indeed enter a discussion of the problem of beginning(s) in a complex, multi-layered approach. They thematise the 'before' of their own beginning on the levels of language, narrative and content and thus tie back to and elaborate on Mary Shelley's observation in the 1831 "Introduction to Frankenstein". Each of the narratives is concerned in one way or another with explaining how it came to be begun and narrated at all. Mindful of this fact, we might revisit Leander and find his claim that "[…] a beginning requires a supporting narrative, which can describe the beginning *as* event" (2008: 19) successfully performed in the prominent interdependence between the narrators, the content of their narratives, and the act of narration in *Frankenstein*. This holds especially true when taking into account how Leander continues to problematise the elusive nature and inaccessibility of a beginning:

> At the logical scale, it can be observed that a beginning already contains narrative components because, as analytic philosophers have shown, sentences that include beginnings will automatically be narrative sentences (Danto, *Analytical Philosophy* 157). When undertaking a beginning, we must therefore begin, not at "the beginning," but by the description under which we wish to place the event. (Leander 2008: 19)

There are three aspects to this statement, which may help to better grasp the principles by which Shelley's de- and reconfiguration of beginnings works. Firstly, Leander's assessment correlates with Shelley's insight on every beginning being "linked to something that went before": in a chain of equivalent events that can be traced back indefinitely, each and any might be a beginning or a middle or an end, for that matter, but only becomes so by a descriptive, a narrative act. We see evidence of that in the different starting points the three narrators in *Frankenstein*

take: Walton begins *in medias res* with a journey already begun, the monster begins *ab ovo* from the earliest possible point of remembrance, and Frankenstein, we might say, begins *ante ovum* in a time before his own conception and birth. Each of the narrators selects a different instance in the order of the events they relate – and not by chance.

This brings me to the second aspect of the previous quotation I would like to emphasise. What Leander suggests and later explicates, what we see staged in *Frankenstein* is that the narrative constitutes the beginning as beginning, but the beginning also constitutes the narrative as narrative (see Leander: 21). And depending on focus and goal of the narrative, certain beginnings will serve better than others. Walton begins in the middle of things in order to subsequently take a middle, moderately neutral position in the antagonism of Frankenstein and his creature (I do not mean to say that he does not carry decidedly more sympathies for the creator than for the monster, but that he is not an actor in either of their narratives, whereas each of them is not only narrator but narrated by the other). Furthermore, Walton serves in the in-between role of a mediator: It is him who writes down Frankenstein's and thereby also the Monster's narrative (see Shelley 2012: 18). He records and translates the spoken word into letters, he transports the stories of the other two. Frankenstein, on the other hand, accentuates in the description of his ancestry the notion of a 'natural' beginning, an organic origin, because he sets out to relay a cautionary tale which will depend on the opposition of the natural and the artificial to substantiate the judgement of his project and its result as atrocity – monstrosity. Lastly, the creature has sound reason to begin with the first days of an unfilled mind and unformed personality: throughout the narrative it is essentially arguing that it was not born a monster, but forced and formed into this role by the neglect of its creator, its unfulfilled yearning for affection and sympathy, as well as the disgust and mistreatments with which it was met by humans in general. Since the creature makes a case for the idea of *tabula rasa* rather than notions of innatism, it makes only sense to begin by describing the blank state on which the claim of initial innocence rests.

The third and final aspect arises from the other two – the arbitrariness of all possible beginnings and the calculated determination of any chosen beginning – and may further deepen an understanding of how *Frankenstein* prods at and probes

the ambiguity of beginnings, and to what effect. By conceiving of several different starting points, perspectives, styles and strategies the novel demonstratively performs the seesaw of inseparably reciprocal definition of narrative and beginning, which Leander elucidates. It thereby produces an ever shifting, increasingly unsettling sense of the interminableness of beginnings which can only be rated as the consequent continuation of Shelley's thought: if there is always a beginning before a beginning, the chain or thread can be traced indefinitely back to unmask all beginnings as actual middles. They only become beginnings, when constructed as such, when a narrative chooses to set and stage a certain point as beginning. No simple or definite answer can be given as to what constitutes the beginning of *Frankenstein* nor even what figures as the definite 'before'. The structural order of the novel's three narrations sets out with the telling of Walton's account, followed by those of Frankenstein and the Creature, but with regard to the story, Frankenstein's beginning is situated at the chronologically earliest point, before the monster was created. And both his and the monster's beginning relate events that have taken place before Walton encounters the strange traveller in the arctic ocean. Depending on the vantage point and whether one chooses to focus on *fabula* or *syuzhet*, all three narratives open with an instance that could be classified as both before and after something else. Therefore, their interplay reveals an ever-intermediate position of each of the narratives' outsets. What and if some event can constitute as the beginning depends on elementary narrative factors. As the novel shifts through different scenarios of *who* tells a story, *how*, and *to what end* our sense of beginnings shifts, too, and possibly altogether falters.

(Hi)stories provide frameworks to make sense of the world by presenting sequences of events, chains of cause and effect. Their telling is prompted by questions of origin: why, how, where, when did it all start? Insofar as the constitution of beginnings is a strategy for coping with contingency, one can argue that as Shelley's text effectively thwarts this strategy, a certain radicality inheres in it. If it is possible to embark on a narrative at another – any other – time and place, if beginnings are identified as a sort of necessary fiction and a matter of choice, it stands to reason that all subsequent events and elements must be conditional, too. They are, as we have found, dependent on the particular agency and agenda of the narrator. With this realisation, let us approach another of the questions that led us

here: Why is Shelley distancing herself and her work from any claim of totality? She is preparing the way for a drastic consequence of her introductory diagnosis, which we find performed in the novel: there is no such thing as a singular, absolute beginning, therefore there cannot be any singular, absolute narrative, and therefore all claims of absolute narrative authority must collapse.

Of course, any narrative must set out at some point; the kind of authority it asserts will depend on whether that point is presented as *a* beginning or *the* beginning – a starting point or an origin. To reflect on the relativity of beginnings, as Shelley does in her introduction to the third edition of *Frankenstein*, and to deny their singularity is to refuse and refute absolute narrative authority and interpretative sovereignty. Her signature novel is designed to drive that point home. J. Paul Hunter observes the "shifting sense of authority and doubts about the reliability of authority itself" which *Frankenstein* produces by switching between the perspectives of Walton, Frankenstein and the Creature, and particularly in juxtaposing the latter two – by setting up what Hunter describes as "the story-within-a-story, box-within-a-box structure of interlocking narratives" (2012, xvii) or what Chris Baldick describes in related terms as "the concentric Russian-doll structure of the narrative" (Baldick 1987). Such conceptions of multiple containers enclosing one another may seem to lend themselves to describe the structural order of the text, at least as it presents itself at first glance, since indeed, Frankenstein's narrative closes after the monster's and Walton's after Frankenstein's. I, however, propose a flatter metaphor or one less suggestive of hierarchical structures: the patchwork. A "box-within-a-box" and perhaps to an even greater extent a "Russian-doll" imply a progressive decline in size and thereby continuous subordination. They also imply – since in these conceptions the components of the entity that is the text are pictured to insert into one another – that each part was made to neatly fit the respective larger one. But this is not the case in Shelley's novel. The three first-person narratives grate, contrast, contradict.

For precisely this reason I refrained from using the conventional terminology of 'frame' and 'embedded narrative' throughout my previous analysis, because like the box-in-a-box or Russian doll comparisons the terminology connotes a ranking order from outside to inside, distinct demarcation and well-paired design. A frame sets off what it encloses from the surroundings and thus

supports the picture or painting to be perceived a standalone, independent work. Whereas in a patchwork we cannot make out a clear hierarchical relationship between patches, nor could we discern that one patch holds a definite, singular function of contextualising its neighbouring patch(es). Rather, one might begin by observing a particular patch, take in its colouring, and begin to fathom the pattern, only to find it interrupted by some stitches directing the gaze to the next utterly dissimilar patch, sporting a different colour and a different pattern. The patchwork unnerves the beholder. Even if later and somewhere else in the patchwork another patch appears to be made from the same fabric as the first, it must be seen with other eyes: it has been discontinued, revealed to be a displaced fragment, to having been ripped out of its original context and reworked to uncomfortably sit within a heterogenous fabrication.

Such a heterogenous and unnerving fabrication is produced in *Frankenstein*, as Mary Shelley deliberately sets out to call to attention the mismatch of the narratives she patches together into one work. The creature's tale prompts readers to re-examine both subject matter and presentation style of the two previous narratives. Its eloquence and sound reasoning, as well as the disorientation, helplessness and profound loneliness of which it tells disrupt and disavow Walton's and Frankenstein's attribution of savageness and monstrosity. The creature's adoption of a more authentic style of spoken language using parentheses and paraphrases contrasts markedly with the literary tone Frankenstein strikes in his prefatory speech. And both Frankenstein and Walton rely on the literary conventions of autobiographical and epistolary novels, respectively, to set up their narratives. What is more, we find the opposition that Frankenstein depends upon when it comes to the content and concern of his narrative – 'natural', organic beginnings versus the 'unnatural', artificial construction of the creature – reverted when viewing his narrative juxtaposed to that of the monster. On the levels of language and style, the monster's execution of storytelling is situated much closer to informal oral customs, which are conceived of as 'natural' speech, and thus exposes the artificiality and constructedness of any rhetorically polished or literary mode.

With the text of *Frankenstein* Shelley picks at the fabric of fiction and pulls on any loose threads she manages to ream out until formerly tidy seams and such

stitches as may be kept carefully hidden by other narratives unravel to lay bare a work of patches in which notions of 'before' and 'after', 'natural' and 'artificial', 'cohesion', 'truth' and 'totality' are constantly summoned and dispelled again. Or, to recall my reflection on the properties of a patchwork from the introduction: the text of the novel both produces meaningful relations within itself and calls them into question. As a patchwork it retains a liminal position between beginning and narrative, production and completion, fragmentation and integration.

The conclusions to which this exploration of narrative beginnings has carried us are: that the narratives of *Frankenstein* connect to Shelley's Introduction, that they are concerned with the before of their own beginnings, their own production and dependence on intertextuality, that they are both contextualised and contradicted by the surrounding narratives, and thus can be comprehended as a patchwork configuration that must be examined while taking into account the back and forth between the different patches prescribing and re-describing one another rather than presuming a linear process guiding form outside to inside. In light of this, I must at this point revoke the distinction I have made at the beginning of this chapter between paratextual elements and the body of the text. If each textual instance of 'before' functions as patch, rather than frame, Shelley's preface must be viewed as another patch indivisibly sewn into the rest of the patchwork. Hence, it cannot only be regarded as pointing toward what is about to unfold within the text but must also be considered as being pointed to by that text.[22] The other patches both feed from it and back into it: recalling or replacing, reinforcing or refusing its initial meaning. As Shelley's comment has given rise to an analysis of the narrative beginnings in *Frankenstein*, so the findings of this analysis now give rise to revisit the Introduction.

3 Origins and Originality: From Marvellous Creation to Makeshift Fabrication

Mary Shelley was prompted to write her 1831 Introduction by the publishers of *Bentley's Standard Novels*, to whom she had just sold the copyright for

[22] Even more so, since the Introduction in question was written in 1831 for the novel's third, revised edition, thirteen years after the publication of the first edition of *Frankenstein*. Therefore, it can be considered as a paratext caught in a tension of precedence and succession.

Frankenstein (see St. Clair 2012: 250f.). They "expressed a wish that I should furnish them with some account of the origin of the story" (Shelley 2012: 165), as she explains in the opening sentence. She is asked to address "the origin of the story", but instead and notably trades that term in her following meditation on literary creation for the plainer word 'beginning'. Why? It is not likely that Shelley takes the notions of 'beginning' and 'origin' to be synonymous, because (as observed in the previous chapter) while an idea of origin as a singular and the seemingly more natural source of events or existence does crop up, the novel's overall narrative patchwork directs readers to take in beginnings both as multiple and artificially produced. We might consult Edward Said's highly influential book *Beginnings: Intention and Method* for an explication of the crucial difference between the two terms and the concepts they convey: He distinguishes between "*beginning* as having the more active meaning, and *origin* the more passive one: thus "X *is the origin of* Y," while "The beginning A *leads to* B" (Said 5f.).

> Said also differentiates the human, secular, consciously intentional, and ceaselessly reexamined concept of beginnings from the idea of origins, which are instead theological, mythical, and privileged: "an origin centrally dominates what derives from it" (373), while the beginning encourages nonlinear development, relations of adjacency, and a movement toward dispersion. (Richardson 2008: 14)

Shelley invokes such a theological-mythical connotation of origin as early as the cover page of her novel. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* reads the full title of her work, in reference to the Greek myth of the creation of humankind. It is followed by the epigraph "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay/ To mould me man?/ Did I solicit thee From darkness to promote me?" (Shelley 2012: 3) – a quotation from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the most prominent literary rendition of the biblical Genesis story. In this paratextual allusion to the two grand narratives of origin in Western culture – the Graeco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian creation myths – the title page of *Frankenstein* discloses the principal concern of the novel that follows. It will engage with the peculiarities of creation and origin but, as it turns out, not by staging them as singular, divine or even natural occurrences. On the contrary, the text and its multi-perspective patchwork of narratives deconstruct and thereby dispel any mythically elevated notions or dogmatic certainties of origin.

To similarly dispel the idea of a singular origin with regards to literary creation and replace it instead with a discussion of multiple beginnings seems to be Shelley's major concern in her Introduction:

> Every thing must have a beginning, to speak in Sanchean phrase; and that beginning must be linked to something that went before. The Hindoos give the world an elephant to support it, but they make the elephant stand upon a tortoise. Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. (Shelley 2012: 167)

It is striking and at the same time only consequent that Shelley does not choose the more familiar, culturally immediate, Christian cosmovision to underscore her argument, but instead opts for the remote, 'exotic' Hindu model of world order. According to monotheistic narrative, in *the* beginning there was *one* God – source and creator of everything thereafter and precisely the kind of origin that, as Said maintains, "centrally dominates what derives from it". It is also precisely the analogy for artistic creation that Shelley seemingly rejects when she states that invention "does not consist in creating out of void". Thus, an author, as Shelley determines this definite limitation, cannot and should not be conceived of as godlike creator or unconditional source of her materials: "the materials must, in the first place, be afforded", that is also to say, must be pre-existent.

Shelley's is a radical position, when considering that a positively antithetical idea and conception of authorship was gaining ground at the time of her writing. At the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century a budding cult around the idea of literary genius insisted on the author as absolute origin of his entirely original work. Edward Young, poet and frantic evangelist of the genius idea, had already proclaimed genius in 1759 to be "the power of accomplishing great things without the means generally reputed necessary to that end" (Young 1918: 13). Young goes on to embellish what was to become a seminal notion of genius by contrasting comprehensible processes of production that rest on learned ability and craftmanship with the mythically shrouded art of creation as only genius can achieve it:

> A *genius* differs from a *good understanding*, as the magician from a good architect; *that* raises his structure by means invisible; *this* by the skilful use of common tools. Hence genius has ever been supposed to partake of something divine. (Young 1918: 13)

In Young's configuration genius, being both magical and divine, does not rely on pre-existent substances, supplies or tools – it is capable of *creatio ex nihilo*. That Shelley, quite on the contrary, emphasises the impossibility of "creating out of void" and opposes this idea with the alternative of creation "out of chaos", especially insisting on the necessity and, more importantly, necessary availability of materials, suggests her being both acutely aware and decidedly in disagreement with contemporary and influential ideas of originality and genius. How were these ideas formed, formulated and promoted? Do we find them implemented in Shelley's novel which introduces a figure of at least supposed genius in Frankenstein? Or is that notion questioned and severely undercut as Frankenstein tragically fails and his aspiration to divine creation turns out to be mere preposterous imitation with a monstrous outcome? And can Frankenstein's scientific endeavours be aligned with Shelley's literary efforts? If that is the case, we must read Shelley's text as much more than the ghost story "which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror" (Shelley 2012: 167) she reports in her introduction to have set out to write. More, too, than the "tissue of horrible and disgusting absurdity" one early reviewer dismisses it as, complaining that the novel lacks any "lesson of conduct, manners, or morality" (Croker 2012: 218). Instead, we must understand it to be partaking in highly topical literary and intellectual discourses of the author's time.

Guided by these questions, this chapter will first take a cursory survey of some of the more influential articulations of the genius concept in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and identify likely reference points to these articulations both in Shelley's introduction and her novel. Secondly, the aim will be to assess to which extent these notions of genius and original literary creation are not only registered but rejected in the text of *Frankenstein*. And lastly, should the novel indeed prove to comment on and position itself against highly influential conceptions of literature and authorship, the question is if it proposes an alternative model and what that model entails.

3.1 Creation *ex nihilo*: Concepts of Genius

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are often held to mark the threshold of 'modernity'. Especially with regard to literary and intellectual discourses 'The Romantic Period' is considered to have been tremendously formative for the following centuries. It was, in the words of Andrew Bennet, a period "of the most energetic theorizing about literature and literary creation" (Bennet 2005: 56). Central to much of this theorizing was a conception of authorship with a stress on individuality, uniqueness and originality. It culminated in the idea of genius capable of creation out of nothing and arguably held much appeal and had many strong advocates among the Romantics.

> In his classic study of the theory of romantic poetics, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), M.H. Abrams argues that during the eighteenth century the dominant model of literary creation was transformed from that of a mirror held up to nature to one in which the author is like a lamp, emitting light from a singular origin or source. (Bennett 2005: 59)

The transformation that Abrams observes is a departure from an understanding of literary production as mimetic activity, a "change from imitation to expression, and from the mirror to the fountain, the lamp, and related analogues" (Abrams 1971: 57). It encompasses that what the author produces must not be imitation, but original. And major (pre- and) romantic propagators of the author as genius, such as Edward Young, William Duff, and William Hazlitt, took great care to define what constitutes an 'original' – mainly by relying on a set of binary oppositions. An original, the way Young envisions it in his *Conjectures on Original Composition*, is situated in the realm of the organic rather than the artificial. It is the product of art rather than labour, and created independently – it springs into being new, and explicitly not out of pre-existing materials.

> An *Original*, may be said to be of a *vegetable* nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it *grows*, it is not *made*: *Imitations* are often a sort of *manufacture* wrought up by those *mechanics*, *art*, and *labour*, out of pre-existent materials not their own. (Young 1918: 7)

Expressions which emphasise the organic quality of original creation like 'vegetable', 'root', and 'growing' mark off the exclusive field of art from more trivial craftmanship. Such plant-based imagery is adopted, too, by Percy Shelley in

his *Defence of Poetry*, where he describes poetry as "the plant" which "must spring from its seed" (P. Shelley 1915: 82). Percy Shelley also stresses originality in his description of the poetical faculty, which according to him "creates new materials of knowledge, and power, and pleasure" (P. Shelley 1915: 110).

Similarly, the newness of genius creation was praised by William Hazlitt, whom Robert Macfarlane identifies as a "key figure controlling the transmission of the idea of literary originality" (Macfarlane 2007: 34). Hazlitt, however, departed from a strict rejection of the artificial when describing William Godwin's prowess as original novelist[23]:

> […] the chains with which he rivets our attention are forged out of his own thoughts, link by link, blow for blow, with glowing enthusiasm: we see the genuine ore melted in the furnace of fervid feeling, and moulded into stately and *ideal* forms; and this is so far better than peeping into an old iron shop, or pilfering from a dealer in marine stores! (Hazlitt 1825: 203)

But although Hazlitt uses the metaphor of smithery and metalwork, a metaphor of cultural technique therefore instead of natural emergence, he stresses seamless, homogenous creation in contrast to collecting or even pilfering odds and ends from iron shops and marine stores. He thereby calls to attention another problem that significantly tied into questions of originality – that of ownership versus theft. Following the pattern of lamp-like emittance that Abrams identifies, Hazlitt insists in his *Lectures on the English Poets* and his critical essays collected in *Table Talk* on autonomous artistic generation: "[…] Hazlitt can be seen to lay considerable stress upon the idea that authentic literature flowed from a source within the individual writer […]" (Macfarlane 2007: 34f.).

Possibly most relevant for the question if and how Mary Shelley positioned herself toward these discourses and theories is that the genius author's capacity to encompass or himself embody an autonomous source of original art was imagined to be inborn rather than acquired. This can be evinced for instance in William Duff's *An Essay on Original Genius*, in which he emphatically professes that the "power

[23] "This same striking image of the poet's mind as a furnace in which truly original thoughts are smelted recurred in the essay on Byron, where Hazlitt again accentuated the endogenous nature of authentic creation: 'Instead of taking his impressions from without, [Byron] moulds them according to his own temperament, and heats the materials of his imagination in the furnace of his passions.'" (Macfarlane 2007: 35)

which the mind possesses, of discovering something NEW and UNCOMMON" is "NATIVE" to genius (Duff 1767: 86). More prominent still, are the efforts directed towards maintaining the idea of genius as inherent quality by Isaac D'Israeli in *The Literary Character, Illustrated by the History of Men of Genius* (which incidentally was published in 1818, the same year as Shelley's *Frankenstein*):

> His book was, in effect, a statistical analysis of the nature of literary genius—and he slanted his statistics in order to substantiate his firm belief in the doctrine of *poeta nascitur non fit*. For D'Israeli, greatness in letters was thrust upon individuals, it was not earned. (Macfarlane 2007: 21)

As Robert Macfarlane explains, "one of the main obstacles which these theories of originality as creation *ex nihilo* had to overcome was the Lockian prescription of knowledge as arising purely from the perception of the phenomenal world" (Macfarlane 2007: 20). But we have already seen precisely that Lockian idea of the *tabula rasa* elaborately showcased and affirmed in Shelley's *Frankenstein*: The creature's initially blank mind is filled and formed into an educated one, its dumbness transformed into eloquence. And the text explicitly stages this transition as progress – one of gradual development, of discovery, of learning. The creature's knowledge and its ability to produce and narrate a story are assembled from bits and pieces (picked up in autodidactic efforts and by eavesdropping). The education of its mind accumulates like a patchwork: from incoherent and makeshift parts, gradually and actively integrated, made to somehow fit together, rather than having passively emerged and being inherently complete. The argument, which is made, that the creature was not meant to be what it eventually becomes, not born gifted with any special talents is, of course, most drastically underscored by the fact that it was not born at all.

It is perhaps a telling coincidence, or no coincidence at all, that the endorsement of acquisition over inherent talent which ran contrary to all notions of genius and which D'Israeli therefore severely attacked in the *The Literary Character*, finding "the doctrine 'of the equality of men', which lay at the political heart of the Lockian epistemology, to be '*monstrous*' [my italics]" (Macfarlane 2007: 21) is supported in Shelley's novel and supports the narrative of a proclaimed *monster*. She could not have chosen a more drastic example to illustrate that basically anybody has the potential to develop particular literary skills than a

creature which finds itself in a position of most extreme Otherness, which begins its existence as remote as possible from any kind of privileged position and still manages to rise to rhetorical versatility.

Mary Shelley herself, as a woman writer of the eighteen hundreds, and a very young one at that (who began the work on her signature novel at the age of eighteen), was, one might say, somewhat of a monstrosity herself. As she points out in the introduction she was frequently asked "How I, then a young girl, came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?" (Shelley 2012: 165) But however unusual people might have found, that a young woman wrote a novel of such scale and extensive moral, scientific and social concern, or in fact, that she wrote a novel at all, Shelley makes no moves or gestures of styling herself and her authorship as considerably exceptional, let alone in terms of genius. "It is not singular that, as the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity, I should very early in life have thought of writing" (2012: 165), Shelley, daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, unpretentiously states. Having thus pointed out the favourable conditions of being exposed to literature and a literary occupation early in life, she goes on to describe how she would scribble and – marked in inverted commas – 'write stories' as a young child (see Shelley 2012: 165), thereby unabashedly admitting to both the imperfection and, moreover, exercising nature of those early narrative endeavours. Just as she attests to her writing skills having been influenced by parental environment and honed in repeated practice instead of portraying them as an exclusive gift she was born with, so too, she takes care to point out that the idea for her novel was not born out of void or out of herself, but that external influences contributed considerably to its development.

As the original unsigned preface to *Frankenstein*[24] of 1818 mentions, as John William Polidori's "Letter Prefaced to *The Vamyre*" reports, and as Shelley's introduction of 1831 recounts in detail, the incentive for contriving the idea for *Frankenstein* was given in 1816 at Lake Geneva, where Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, her stepsister Claire Clairmont, and her lover Percy Shelley, spent much of the summer with Lord Byron and his physician John Polidori, who had taken up

[24] Which Shelley attributes in the introduction of 1831 to her husband Percy. (see Shelley 2012: 169)

residence close by. According to Shelley, Byron, because the two parties had passed their time with the reading of German ghost stories, suggested they should each write their own. But Shelley recalls her difficulties to produce an idea for a story: "I felt that blank incapability of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations" (Shelley 2012: 167). 'Nothing', in Shelley's account, is a counterforce to invention, not the source from which it magically springs. Admittedly, she later describes the moment of inspiration in terms of sudden, unconscious occurrence, as coming 'unbidden', 'possessing', 'guiding', and 'gifting' her with the idea (see Shelley 168), but not before tracing the influences and impressions that coalesced into that moment of seemingly spontaneous inspiration:

> Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated. (Shelley 2012: 168)

Shelley, like the monster in her novel, is collecting information and inspiration from a position of Otherness – as a woman present and attentive to, but not exactly included in the conversation of two renowned male poets. Nonetheless, the topics which offered themselves in these conversations on galvanism, experiments with vermicelli and the re-animation of corpses (see Shelley 2012: 168) are those Shelley picks up on – they are the materials she can "afford". She openly reveals them as such in her introduction after having already put them to good use in a novel which by that point is about to be printed in its third edition.

In addition to Shelley's anecdote on some of the elements that she accumulated into the core idea of *Frankenstein*, an abundance of other literary materials can be found to have been utilized for the novel.[25] In "Assembling *Frankenstein*" Chris Baldick outlines some of the more indirect influences that can be traced to have fed into Shelley's text, among others the motif of disastrous scientific discovery from her father William Godwin's writings, an "interest in the theory of education and a tendency […] to stress the influence of a character's

[25] Among other evidence also due to Shelley's diligently kept records of her reading (see Baldick 2012: 176).

upbringing" from her mother Mary Wollstonecraft's works, as well as those directly quoted or recognizably borrowed from or alluded to in Shelley's text, such as Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", Mme de Genlis "Pygmalion et Galatée", and, most prominently, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (see Baldick 2012: 176–179). That many of Shelley's borrowings present themselves openly recognisable in the text goes hand in hand with the stance she takes in the introduction and her open recognition of the impossibility of creation out of nothing.

As we have seen thus far, conceptions of genius were articulated in terms of exclusivity and inherent predisposition towards those inner powers necessary for creation. Quite contrary to that, Shelley represents her authorship and literary capacities in accordance with the Lockian doctrine (which is again negotiated in the novel) to be acquired commodities. It has also become clear that genius was thought to constitute itself by the manner in which it creates – originally and *ex nihilo*, whereas Shelley associates creation with the collection and repurposing of available matter. And while the contemporary notion of original creation is based on visions of coherent natural emergence from a singular internal origin, Shelley emphasises the multiplicity and externality of her sources, both by pointing out elements from conversations that were conductive to her initial idea and by marking phrases and motifs as intertextual borrowings in the text of the novel. Such an adoption of other materials that was denounced by disciples of the genius persuasion like Hazlitt as acts of theft is identified in Shelley's introduction as fundamental for any literary invention.

The role of an author in which Shelley locates herself and the mode of literary creation she proposes are, if D'Israeli's opinion is humoured, downright monstrous in their opposition to ideas of genius and original creation. And precisely in monstrous terms Shelley presents a counter-concept to that of exclusive original creation. That concept, I would argue, can best be described and understood as patchwork. We have already observed certain parallels that can be drawn between the creature in and the writer of *Frankenstein*, since they both protrude from a position of Otherness into a more privileged sphere and position (of narrator and author, respectively) by means of appropriating knowledge and skills which were not exactly intended for them. Neither of the two makes a secret of the fact that their

status was actively, inadequately and in parts illegitimately produced rather than conceived from some supernatural instance of providence or destiny.

But what about Victor Frankenstein? After all that we have discovered up to this point, if the monster can be read in analogy to the author Shelley, it might seem obvious and convenient to assume, that Frankenstein, since he is positioned in the novel in antagonism to his creature and at least to a certain degree typified as genius should be taken to embody 'the other side' of the controversy around literary creation with which Shelley's novel engages. But the situation does not present itself quite as simple as that, when considering that Shelley towards the end of the introduction proclaims the text to be her "hideous progeny" (Shelley 2012: 169). If we take Shelley by her word, the novel itself is the monster. Thereby, a second parallel arises, this time between Shelley and Frankenstein, who are both creators of a monster. For the last part of this chapter I will therefore consider in which instances the figure of Frankenstein is reminiscent of Romantic conceptions of genius. Furthermore, I will discuss if and in what way these conceptions necessarily break down when considering the manner in which he creates – namely by operations and processes that correspond very well with Shelley's introductory sketch of her own literary production and can be characterised as a work of patching.

3.2 Making a Monster: Patchwork and the Disillusioned Author-God

There are several instances in Shelley's novel that indicate how the figure of Frankenstein is somehow tied up with the type of genius. As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, Walton's characterisation of the man he takes on board his ship features certain characteristics commonly used in descriptions of genius, most prominently perhaps, now that we have engaged more intimately with Romantic discourses on genius, an attribution of a divine inner world that Frankenstein, according to Walton, can take recourse to and where he "will be like a celestial spirit" (Shelley 2012: 17). What is more, Frankenstein later affirms his affiliation with notions of genius when he recounts his arrival at the university of Ingolstadt and how he first discloses his role models Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus to professor Krempe who, however, bluntly dismisses those authors' works as outdated "nonsense" (Shelley 2012: 27). In a discursive passage Frankenstein, the narrator, then reflects why his younger self was displeased to be given an alternative

list of books which Krempe considers more appropriate and relevant for the study of natural philosophy and why he expected the recommended reading to be rather unengaging:

> Besides, I had a contempt for the uses of modern natural philosophy. It was very different, when the masters of the science sought immortality and power; such views, although futile, were grand: but now the scene was changed. The ambition of the inquirer seemed to limit itself to the annihilation of those visions on which my interest in science was chiefly founded. I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little worth. (Shelley 2012: 28)

The ideal Frankenstein is committed to is strikingly contradictive: grandeur vies with futility, ambitious dreams with sober reality. A negotiation of these contradictions is continued in conversation with a second professor, Waldman, who also judges Frankenstein's idols, those "men of genius" (Shelley 2012: 29), and their ambitions to be definitively outdated, but not without acknowledging their role as forerunners of modern science. As Waldman outlines the difference between a pre-modern and modern understanding of scientific work, the very same dichotomy resurfaces by which advocates of originality delineated genius creation from mere imitating manufacture. Modern natural philosophers "whose hands seem only made to dabble in dirt, and their eyes to pour over the microscope or crucible" (Shelley 2012: 28f.) rely on manual labour and instruments. But Waldman's description of seemingly base, wholly de-mythicised, tool-dependent operations shifts to a decidedly positive valuation. In his view, the modern natural philosopher's activity yields results and permits to "penetrate into the recesses of nature, and shew how she works in her hiding places" (Shelley 2012: 29), whereas "the ancient teachers […] promised impossibilities", instead of creating out of nothing, they "performed nothing" (Shelley 2012: 29). Therefore, Frankenstein's admiration for grand ambition and his disdain for the limitations of sober, realistic expectations are severely problematised even before he concocts his plan to uncover the secret of life and create a living being. But is the former problematisation suspended as he does succeed in realising his own grand goals?

Certainly, the scene of Frankenstein's first breakthrough is remarkably reminiscent of the emitting lamp imagery that Abrams uses to describe Romantic conceptions of authorship and also – strengthening my assumption of a conceivable

parallel between Frankenstein and Shelley – of Mary Shelley's recollection of the suddenness with which the idea for her story arose:

> I paused, examining and analysing all the minutiae of causation, as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life, until from the midst of this darkness a sudden light broke in upon me – a light so brilliant and wondrous, yet so simple, that while I became dizzy with the immensity of the prospect which it illustrated, I was surprised that among so many men of genius, who had directed their inquiries towards the same science, that I alone should be reserved to discover so astonishing a secret. (Shelley 2012: 31f.)

The pioneering discovery that Frankenstein feels entitles him to be now classified as a man of genius is described in terms of spontaneous illumination. Yet it constitutes no clean departure from imitation to emittance, or as Abrams puts it from the mirror to the lamp. Rather, a mimetic aspect intrudes, casts a shadow onto the image of the brilliant light: Frankenstein's realisation results from "examining and analysing" phenomena that present in decaying bodies. His idea is produced not independent of an external world but by observing that world. Like Shelley in the introduction, Frankenstein signals surprise at the suddenness of the idea, and like Shelley's disclosure of preceding conversations having contributed to her inspiration, the claim of pure, unconditional, and spontaneous brilliance with regards to Frankenstein's discovery is quickly disavowed:

> The astonishment which I had at first experienced on this discovery soon gave place to delight and rapture. After so much time spent in painful labour, to arrive at once at the summit of my desires, was the most gratifying consummation of my toils. But this discovery was so great and overwhelming, that all the steps by which I had been progressively led to it were obliterated, and I beheld only the result. What had been the study and desire of the wisest men since the creation of the world, was now within my grasp. Not that, like a magic scene, it all opened upon me at once: the information I had obtained was of a nature rather to direct my endeavours so soon as I should point them towards the object of my search, than to exhibit that object already accomplished. (Shelley 2012: 32)

Exaltation of a mental achievement as mythical-magical product can only occur by a repression of the process of production. Finality is fabricated from obscuration of causality. Thus, to make a connection between Frankenstein and Shelley, between scientific and literary ambition is not implausible at all: the steps leading to his

discovery are as discernible as those leading to Shelley's idea of the novel. Invention in Frankenstein's case consists just as little "in creating out of void" as in Shelley's, the difference between the two creators lies only in the readiness to humbly admit to the fact.

While the suspicion that genius may be an act of retrospective self-conception by omission of certain facts is showing in the account of the moment of inspiration, at the outset of putting his idea into motion Frankenstein still clings to the ideal of original creation. He pictures the situation between himself and his future creation, similarly to that claimed to exist between the genius and his literary work, as one of natural filiation and indebtedness or possession:

> A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve their's. (Shelley 2012: 33)

Yet, even if throughout the execution of his plan "to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man" (Shelley 2012: 33) he diverts himself with delusions of organic formation and the greater good to which his work would contribute, the procedures Frankenstein undertakes are neither magical nor original nor natural. "I pursued nature to her hiding places" (Shelley 2012: 33), Frankenstein professes, using almost the same expression with which Waldman demarcates what he deems modern scientific methods from the phantasms that governed men of genius. Furthermore, in a second echoing Waldman's phrasing of natural philosophers seeming to "dabble in dirt" is taken both to its literal and an even more gruesome sense, as Frankenstein details what this pursuit of nature entailed – he reports to have "dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay" (Shelley 2012: 33). The mention of the animation of clay might connote a divine act of creation like the Christian and Greek myths evoked on the novel's title page stage it, would it not clash so jarringly with the "unhallowed" nature of Frankenstein's doings. Frankenstein's "clay" is but a euphemism, for he is collecting flesh, bones, and organs of dead bodies, not using a fresh substance. He is not in rightful possession of the materials he works with but must steal from graves and charnel houses. His is not a work of seamlessly forming unshaped matter, his is a work of detaching and reattaching, of patching together parts and pieces he has ripped out of other corpses much like the materials,

motifs and quotations in Shelley's text were taken out of their original context and repurposed to be sewn into a wholly different fabric. The creation of the monster in the novel functions as *mise en abyme* for the creation of the novel.

From a contemporary, postmodern, poststructuralist standpoint the recognition of a text's dependence on other texts that Shelley formulates, is an anticipation of the concept of intertextuality. And a rejection or failure of the imperious author figure as takes place in *Frankenstein* calls to mind Roland Barthes seminal essay, "The Death of the Author", in which he argues against critical reliance on the author as origin of a text and its meaning.

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. (Barthes 1977: 146)

This kind of Author-God, that Barthes demands to be abandoned and identifies as "a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of Reformation […]" (Barthes 1977: 142f.), also aligns with the core of the theories on autonomous creation and genius as absolute and thus centrally dominating origin of a literary work that Shelley positions herself against. And when Frankenstein laments having been "the miserable origin and author" of the creature, refusing to be reminded of "circumstances of which I shudder to reflect" (Shelley 2012: 69), the misery of his authorship lies in the fact that the description of authorship as he understood it, or the vision he had of it, cannot be upheld any longer at this point. As long as his authorship was just imagined, he could picture a future organic and filial relationship to his work and the "happy and excellent natures" (Shelley 2012: 33) of the fully formed beings he would have fathered. But once he sees the actual product of his endeavours "on a dreary night of November" (Shelley 2012: 35), and again when he meets his creature some years later in the Swiss mountains and shudders at the "sight tremendous and abhorred" (Shelley 2012: 67), Frankenstein cannot deny the artificiality of his creation any longer, nor in consequence the defectiveness of his former idea of authorship, because like a patchwork – *as* a patchwork – the finished creature plainly, visibly exhibits *that* it was put together

and *how*. Even though Frankenstein has chosen the creature's "limbs in proportion" and the "features as beautiful" (Shelley 2012: 35) they are parts collected from various, unrelated origins and do not exactly blend or fit together at all:

> His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black and glowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips. (Shelley 2012: 35)

In these (to Frankenstein horrid) contrasts the monster's body displays precisely the liminal position between production and completion, fragmentation and integration I have described as characteristic of a patchwork in my introduction. The monster is such an abhorrent sight for Frankenstein because as a patchwork it functions as index of the mode of its production, so that seeing it denies Frankenstein the forgetting he craves. The ideal of originality, as we have seen, depends on the triangular composite consisting of the figure of the author, his or her creation process, and the resulting literary product, which mutually confirm one another's exclusive status. As Frankenstein's visibly incoherent creature exhibits the traces of the utterly unoriginal process of its production any idealised notion of himself as original creator must give way to the horror of disillusionment.

The moment the creation emerges as creation, its actual existence and its fragmentary condition free it of Frankenstein's projections, disconnect it from his ideas of 'fatherhood', and strip away the idea of a singular origin, much like Barthes' author loses all claim to and control of his work once it has been produced:

> As soon as fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (Barthes 1977: 142)

Corresponding to Barthes' reflection, the vision of authorship as disillusionment, detachment and loss of control that unfolds in *Frankenstein* is dramatised through the relationship between Frankenstein and his monster and through the emancipation of the creation from its creator. Mary Shelley's Introduction implies

a similar detachment from and emancipation of her work when she bids her "hideous progeny go forth and prosper" (Shelley 2012: 169).

Taking account of the findings of this chapter, it becomes clear that the novel *Frankenstein* does indeed grapple with questions regarding the nature of authorship, literary creation, and literature itself. It presents a concept that in insisting on the patchwork nature of both literary production and product relocates the author from the status of artist to that of craftsperson and thus stands diametrically opposed to notions of genius and original creation, yet without disregarding or denying the powerful attraction these notions exert. And while both Shelley's diagnosis of material-dependent literary creation and Barthes' finding that "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation" understand every text to be necessarily and profoundly intertextual, I do not mean to propose the term patchwork with regards to Shelley's position on literary creation and the dramatisation of it in her novel as a substitute for a broadly observable intertextual quality of literature in general. Rather, with the patchwork that materialises in *Frankenstein* Shelley is designing a poetological programme that entails intertextual practices but specifically as actively, consciously, self-reflectively performed, celebrating the multiplicity and disparity of un-original materials and employing them to achieve a very specific effect: the troubling, unsettling and upsetting impact that monstrosity causes in the beholder.

4 Unravelling the Seams: The Subversive Potential of Patchwork

The narrative composition, concept of authorship and mode of literary production which we have found performed in Shelley's text can in particular be captured with the term of patchwork, because that term commonly describes a textile technique and thus a cultural practice and mode of production that is historically encoded as feminine. This is relevant because, as the following chapter sets out to discuss, the narrative and literary patchwork that is produced and presented in *Frankenstein* arises from specifically female positions and problems related to that female position. I want to argue that it can and should be understood as an expression of female subjectivity, a mode of production that is partly imposed onto the female

author because of her remoteness and exclusion from dominant patriarchal discourses and narratives but then again is also desirable and useful because it provides a strategy to subvert these oppressive discourses.

We have thus far already observed the destabilising effects of Shelley's patchwork that call into question the notion of a singular beginning on which for instance the Judeo-Christian patriarchal narrative rests and of the author as singular origin central to the idea of genius, which also, as I will elaborate in this chapter, is a distinctly male-centred concoction. To understand how these destabilising effects of the patchwork come about, it will be helpful to consider once more, this time with recourse to the concept of *bricolage* as it was coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss and revisited by Gérard Genette, by which operations the patchwork is produced in the first place. Following this, I will address why the genius concept is a particularly male project and projection of authorship into which Shelley could not seamlessly integrate herself nor her authorship, even if she wanted to. And lastly, I want to elaborate why patchwork can be understood to be tied especially to female positions in *Frankenstein* and how it can be seen as a strategy used to subvert the dominant male discourses that would otherwise silence a subaltern and in this case female voice as well as obstruct a woman's artistic mode of production.

4.1 Monstrous Methods: Ripping, Tearing, Re-using Materials

Patchwork, as Shelley presents and represents it, is not only a preferable, because compared to the genius idea a much less ideologically tainted, non-exclusivist concept of authorship and literary creation, but also for lack of affordable or adequate materials inevitably the only possible mode of production for both herself and Frankenstein as authors of a monster. In light of the initial situation of lack as well as the operations that proceed from it, Shelley and Frankenstein as patchworkers are bricoleurs. This becomes clear when comparing their creative activities to Genette's description of *bricolage* in "Structuralism and Literary Criticism":

> The rule of *bricolage* is "always to make do with whatever is available"[26] and to use in a new structure the remains of previous constructions or destructions, thus making the specific manufacture of materials and tools unnecessary, though at the

[26] Genette here quotes from Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris; Plon, 1962), p. 26; or *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 17

> cost of a double operation of analysis (the extraction of various elements from various already-constituted wholes) and of synthesis (the forming of these heterogeneous elements into a new whole in which none of the re-used elements will necessarily be used as originally intended. (Genette1982: 3)

The techniques of *Bricolage* or patchwork are utterly makeshift solutions that entail a two-fold process or "double operation": before the creative and formative production can begin – the assembling, arranging, stitching, and patching – violent acts of destruction take place. Body parts are ripped from graves, ideas and phrases from other texts and contexts. The impossibility of *ex nihilo* creation forces Frankenstein and Shelley to work aggressively, illegitimately, intertextually, and provisionally with each and any patch they can obtain. I have indicated that the necessity for patchwork as it emerges from Shelley's writing is specifically connected to female authorship. At this point, two objections may arise: firstly, that in her Introduction Shelley proclaims *all* invention, therefore also male invention, to be material-dependent and unoriginal and secondly, that in the novel Frankenstein, even when understood as author, is a man.

With regard to the first objection I would like to observe that while, certainly, Shelley asserts that all literary creation is at its core unoriginal or, to speak with Barthes, every text is in the broadest sense intertextual and a "tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (1977: 146), not every text presents and performs its own unoriginality and intertextuality as overtly *Frankenstein* does. Not every text freely exhibits its multiplicity, incoherence, or even incompatibility of different narrative, thematic and theoretical patches. Not every text actively seeks to leave the stitches that stretch across its different parts visible. This self-reflexivity and ambiguity of production and completion, fragmentation and integration, the conceivable connection between process of production and product, between form and content of *Frankenstein* are the prominent qualities that make the novel a patchwork.

They are also qualities that, as we have seen, unsettle formerly established truths and certainties of a patriarchal system of knowledge: as Shelley's text is setting up multiple beginnings the one God must relinquish his hold on the world to elephants and turtles. As the text is dramatising the faulty and failing ideal of originality, the Author-God must relinquish his sovereignty to a grave pilfering

craftsman who dwells, detaches and reattaches, patches and stitches in a "workshop of filthy creation" (Shelley 2012: 34). And as the text is contrasting Frankenstein's account with that of his creature, narrative authority becomes an uncertainty and readers are left to wonder whether the actual monster might after all not be the character constantly labelled so, but the creator who heartlessly abandons a factually innocent and effectively infant being because he cannot abide to look at it. We see the seams unravel that are meant to hold together the logic on which many a conventional patriarchal "lesson of conduct, manners, or morality" (Croker 2012: 218) is built. And thus it is hardly surprising that the novel's tissue of quotations and allusions, revisions and reversions was troubling, even highly disturbing to some of Shelley's contemporaries like John Croker, who in 1818 warned readers of the *Quarterly Review* against the threat of a "tissue of horrible and disgusting absurdity" he perceived in *Frankenstein* (Croker 2012: 218).

While "allusive and intertextual practices", as mentioned in the introduction, were common at the time of Shelley's writing the general aim, according to Hunter, was to was not to unsettle but to invite "readers to notice the borrowings and celebrate their own skills of knowing, noticing and seeing the relevance" (Hunter 2012: xvi). And while "quite a few such passing allusions occur in the course of the book" (ibid.), allusions that is, which may function mostly as flattery and ornamentation, other materials that Shelley makes use of cannot be accounted for in this way. One of the most prominent sources Shelley works with and re-works is Milton's *Paradise Lost*. And Shelley's reading and rewriting of Milton's and the biblical Genesis material achieves, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in "Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve", a much more drastic and critical effect than that of mere reiteration for the purpose of recognition:

> Significantly, however, as a woman's reading it is most especially the story of hell: hell as a dark parody of heaven, hell's creations as monstrous imitations of heaven's creations, and hellish femaleness as a grotesque parody of heavenly maleness. (Gilbert and Gubar 2012: 328)

To articulate her experiences and perspective as a woman, to formulate "her anxieties about femaleness in such highly literary terms" (Gilbert and Gubar 2012: 329) Shelley has almost no other choice than to acknowledge the singular all-powerful narrative that was so central to not only theological, but cultural, social,

and political definitions of women's alleged nature, character, and prescribed inferiority.

Even when tackling questions of authorship, literature and literary creation Shelley cannot disregard that she is writing about these questions as a woman from a position of female Otherness. There is no great canonised female tradition she can fall back on, nor a powerful myth affirmative of femaleness. The materials available are products of a patriarchal religion and power system, but they are the only ones Shelley can afford:

> For her developing sense of herself as a literary creature and/or creator seems to have been inseparable from her emerging self-definition as daughter, mistress, wife, and mother. Thus she cast her birth myth – her myth of origins – in precisely those cosmogenic terms to which her parents, her husband, and indeed her whole literary culture continually alluded […] (Gilbert and Gubar 2012: 331)

Because she is a woman and there is no established female literary tradition with which she might align her authorship, Shelley can only work as patchworker and *bricoleur* with what is at hand. And the rules of this mode of production allow her to cut and rip and tear out pieces and patches from the mythical Miltonic fabric, thereby destroying the original structure of the material, distorting and subverting its meanings and objective.

4.2 The Wrong Measurements: Writing from a Position of Otherness

The appropriation of the Biblical myth and Milton's epic rendition of it in Shelley's text cannot be assumed and comprehended as a mere template that Shelley followed in producing her plot and characters and by help of which one can simply deduct obvious parallels in an allegorical reading. As Gilbert and Gubar brilliantly demonstrate, the case presented in *Frankenstein* cannot be decoded as easily as allocating the role of the creator God to Frankenstein and that of Adam to the creature. Rather creator and monster, as well as Walton, oscillate in their roles between a set of different but in the novel overlapping biblical characters. Remarking their obsession with problem-solving (Walton's desire for geographic, Frankenstein's for scientific discovery, and the Monster's yearning to discover its own identity (see 2012: 332f.)) Gilbert and Gubar point out:

> All three, like Shelley herself, appear to be trying to understand their presence in a fallen world, and trying at the same time to define the nature of the lost paradise that must have existed before the fall. But unlike Adam, all three characters seem to have fallen not merely from Eden but from the earth, fallen directly into hell, like Sin, Satan, and – by implication – Eve. (Gilbert and Gubar 2012: 333)

This shifting sense of who is who develops, according to Gilbert and Gubar, from the "unusually *evidentiary* technique for conveying the stories" of monster and maker, from "a literary jigsaw puzzle, a collection of apparently random documents from whose juxtaposition the scholar-detective must infer a meaning" (2012: 333). Taking into account the findings of my last two chapters, I would identify this shifting sense, disorientation even, and the "unusually evidentiary technique" that produces them to be part and parcel of the overall strategy that permeates all levels of Shelley's novel and that I propose to summarize under the term of patchwork.

Proceeding from the identification of an interplay of alternating roles Gilbert and Gubar conclude that "at the heart of this apparently masculine book" lies femaleness even though "it has been disguised, buried, or miniaturized" (Gilbert and Gubar 2012: 335) and in their explication of that claim also lies an answer to the second possible concern I mentioned at the beginning of this section: that while Frankenstein can be read as an author figure, he is by all appearance a male author. Yet throughout the displaced pieces from and allusions to the Genesis myth in *Frankenstein*

> […] it eventually becomes clear that though Victor Frankenstein enacts the roles of Adam and Satan like a child trying on costumes, his single most self-defining act transforms him definitively into Eve. (Gilbert and Gubar 2012: 336)

Gilbert and Gubar base the association of Frankenstein with Eve and thus with femaleness on Ellen Moers' and Marc Rubenstein's reading of the creation of the monster as a manifestation of pregnancy and childbirth[27], as well as on Frankenstein's "pursuit of knowledge", "Eve-like pride" and his unleashing of sin in the form of a monster onto the world (see Gilbert and Gubar 2012: 336). The recognition of the utterly patchwork and unoriginal nature of his creation that finally shatters Frankenstein's dreams of being classed amongst "*men* of genius"

[27] See Moers, *Literary Women*, "Female Gothic"; also Rubenstein, "'My Accursed Origin,'"165–166.

(Shelley 2012: 29) correlates strikingly with Gilbert's and Gubar's reading which ties this moment to a recognition of his femaleness:

> Isn't it precisely at this point in the novel that he discovers he is not Adam but Eve, not Satan but Sin, not male but female? If so, it seems likely that what this crucial section of *Frankenstein* really enacts is the story of Eve's discovery not that she must fall but that, having been created female, she *is* fallen, femaleness and fallenness being essentially synonymous. (Gilbert and Gubar 2012: 337)

That this realisation of a female position coincides with the realisation of the elusiveness and inaccessibility of the genius ideal is the first piece of evidence which suggests that this ideal was encoded as markedly masculine.

The second piece of evidence I would like to present is this: While, as Shelley rightly asserts, all literary creation is necessarily unoriginal, those that aspired to the ideal of original creation and found themselves in danger of failing at it, like her husband Percy Shelley for example, coped with this fact by falling back on certain strategies which might not offer themselves to a female writer. Robert Macfarlane observes that even though Percy Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry* (as we have also already seen in Chapter 3) praises a poet's ability to create "new materials" and even though "in his introduction to *The Revolt of Islam* he declared unequivocally that he was 'unwilling to tread in the footsteps of any who have preceded me'", he can be shown to have been acutely aware and plagued by the impossibility of *ex nihilo* creation (Macfarlane 2007: 30):

> Concern about unoriginality and about ownership is a recurrent theme in [Percy] Shelley's letters. After the failure in the marketplace of *The Revolt of Islam*, he began to doubt his abilities as a writer. 'I exercised myself in the despair of producing any thing original,' he wrote to William Godwin on 25 July 1818. He voiced the same worry in a letter to Thomas Love Peacock, remarking despondently that 'I have lately found myself totally incapable of original composition.' These anxieties returned the following year; in November of 1819, he told Leigh Hunt that he had turned to translating Latin because he 'could absolutely do nothing else…original'. Some two years later, a sense of inferiority regarding the achievements of 'Lord Byron' again threw him into 'despair' at his

> unoriginality. 'I write nothing and probably shall write no more', he lamented to Peacock in August 1821.[28] (Macfarlane 2007: 30)

Macfarlane continues to trace the striking disparity and contradictoriness of the notions that Percy Shelley expresses in his texts with regard to originality, fluctuating between the desire to write absolutely uninfluenced by previous texts and an acknowledgement of "the power of unconscious influence upon a poet" (2007: 31). Yet notably, even in instances of such acknowledgement, Percy Shelley does not in principle depart from the term and the idea of genius, as can be evinced in an excerpt from *The Revolt of Islam*:

> But there must be a resemblance which does not depend upon their own will, between writers of any particular age. […] And this is an influence which neither the meanest scribbler nor the sublimest genius of any era can escape; and which I have not attempted to escape. (P.Shelley 1892: 121)

Unoriginal creation as unavoidable influence like Percy Shelley stages it here, is conceived to be an external invisible force affecting the author, also the "sublimest genius" of an author whose existence is still not denied, and who passively and involuntarily receives it. Clearly, such a description still differs tremendously from the conscious and active patchwork operations, the collection and arrangement of second-hand materials portrayed in *Frankenstein*. And it is in the externalisation of influence not remote at all from the idea of genius, at least not from an older conception of it. *The Routledge Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses, Devils and Demons* records *genius* in antiquity to have referred to a

> Roman deity, a personification of the creative powers invested in man: the female counterpart of Genius is Júno. Every man was accredited with his own *genius*, representing his male vigour and strength; and under Greek influence this came later to correspond to Daimon. In the domestic chapels belonging to distinguished Roman families in Pompeii, the genius of the pater familias is depicted as a snake. The belief that every place has its tutelary spirit, its genius loci, is a product of the Roman Empire. (Lurker 2004: 68)

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[28] Macfarlane in this passage quotes from Letter to William Godwin, 25 July 1818. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. F. L. Jones, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), ii. 22.;
Letter to Thomas Love Peacock, 25 July 1818. Ibid. 26.;
Letter to Leigh Hunt, 14–18 November 1819. Ibid. 153.;
Letter to Thomas Love Peacock, 10 August 1821. Ibid. 331.

Before it was reframed to describe an internal power of certain individuals, the term 'genius' referred to a kind of guardian spirit and an externalised power. Much like the invisible influence that Percy Shelley claims everybody ineluctably stands under, everybody according to the Roman notion had a genius. Everybody that is, of course, who was male. We can deduct from this short sketch of the Roman deity of creativity, that genius derives from a concept that from its roots in antiquity was exclusivist in being decidedly reserved for men and that in being assigned to a 'pater familias', the father and sovereign of a family, it was entirely protective of male power and patriarchal legacy.

Percy Shelley was not alone in his doubts about originality: despite widespread anxieties of influence among Romantic writers,

> the 'burden of the past' was understood not solely as a mass of earlier literature which precluded the possibility of originality, but also – according to that other, more benevolent meaning of 'burden' – as a chorus, a multitude of past voices which added depth and definition to their own poetry. (Macfarlane 2007: 32)

Yet a chorus implies, and with this I return to the female writer's Otherness, affiliation, belonging, participation in a group. And the voices of a choir are characterised not only by multiplicity, but harmony – they are coordinated, they share a project they seek to realise, they have come to an understanding which song they would sing and, perhaps apart from variations in pitch, generally adhere to the same overall idea, the same melody and text. But can a female author partake in the choir of a male literary canon? Could she evoke voices from it that fit the melody she wishes to transport? And would her own voice be welcome to join the choir's song?

Voices in Shelley's *Frankenstein* are not raised in unison, but as we observed in Chapter 2, the three narrative voices clash and contradict each other. Some voices are unwelcome. When the creature seeks out its creator in the Swiss mountains to tell its story and make its case for a female companion, Frankenstein exclaims: "Begone! I will not hear you" (Shelley 2012: 68). Perceived, prescribed and disdained as a monster, the creature must desperately plead to be allowed to give voice to its story:

> Let your compassion be moved, and do not disdain me. Listen to my tale: when you have heard that, abandon or commiserate me, as you shall judge that I deserve. But hear me. (Shelley 2012: 69)

And the creature's voice, too, is a female voice. The creature, too, has a moment of profound realisation of fallenness and non-belonging, when it begins to learn of the classificatory and hierarchical systems that structure patriarchal society and determine an individual's place in it:

> I learned that the possessions most esteemed by your fellow-creatures were, high and unsullied descent united with riches. A man might be respected with only one of these acquisitions; but without either he was considered, except in very rare instances, as a vagabond and a slave. And what was I? […] I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property. I was, besides, endowed with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. […] When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned? (Shelley 2012: 83)

Being "not even of the same nature as man", the monsters lacks both any kind of material but also intellectual possession. Like Eve was made from Adam's rib, the monster was made from secondary material. Like woman it learns to perceive itself as inferior because its body was derived from another pre-existing body. The ideal form is human, is male. Woman and monster do not fit the measurements. They are patchworks. And the concerns of a male literary tradition, the authoritative gestures of male authorship have the wrong measurements for the expression of female subjectivity. Thus, woman and monster resort to patchwork, to make do, make fit what otherwise would not.

5 Tailored to Terrify: A Potentially Political Problem

Shelley's monster is both textile and textual, Shelley's text both textile and monstrous: they are both patchworks, tailored to terrify. Why – and what is it that makes them so terrifying? "The monstrosity of the creature is clearly enough the consequence of its assembly from different parts," Chris Baldick observes and immediately objects that "it still sets us a puzzle, […]: why should a creature constructed from parts which Victor selects as perfect and indeed beautiful specimens turn out to be hideously repulsive?" (Baldick 2012: 173). And why, we

might go on asking by the same logic a similar question about the text containing this confusing creature, why should Mary Shelley's novel have been rejected by many of its early readers and reviewers, denounced as "horrible and disgusting absurdity" (Croker 1818: 218), when it integrated materials and direct quotes from earlier and very acclaimed literary works, most notably John Milton's *Paradise Lost*? Because, as I have shown in the previous chapters, the patchwork displaces, disrupts, distorts, and subverts original materials. One tremendously significant reason for the terror the patchworked monster in the novel and the monstrous patchwork that is Shelley's novel can inspire lies in their internal contradictions and the resulting power to unsettle and unmake what was held to be certain, total, absolute. Or, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen phrases this phenomenon in one of his seven theses in "Monster Culture": "The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis" (Cohen 1996: 6).

> [A] refusal to participate in the classificatory "order of things" is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions. (Cohen 1996: 6)

Shelley's novel is fittingly identified as a monstrosity by reviewers like John Croker and in 1831 by the author herself. It is, true to Cohen's thesis, a complex construct of constant category crisis: it destabilises epistemological, narratological, theoretical, theological, cultural social and political categories. The operations that produce it are operations of destruction and re-assemblage, of deconstruction and re-construction. The operations that produce it remain visible in the finished product and thus also retain visible the fact that seemingly stable even untouchable categories can, after all, be touched, torn at, twisted, that they are neither natural nor universal but – because they can be deconstructed – are only manmade, thought up constructs in the first place. Therein lies the remarkable strength of Frankenstein's monster and Shelley's novel, as well as the profound and highly political danger they pose to established systems of power and knowledge and the terror they thereby inspire. In exposing these systems as constructions, they necessarily also imply a possibility of their destruction.

In Chapter 2 by exploring the patchwork of multiple beginnings in *Frankenstein* we have witnessed 'the beginning' as sense-making strategy and category deeply disturbed, and, with it, the authority of personal and general histories, of literary, but also and especially religious and political narratives that justify their narrative and interpretative sovereignty, their position of power, by deriving it from a singular beginning, an origin that, like Said states, is privileged and "centrally dominates what derives from it" (Said 1975: 373). In its narrative structure *Frankenstein* calls into question any certainty of what a beginning can be and moreover what can with certainty be known at all. Walton who acts as mediator and transmitter of knowledge can provide only second-hand and third-hand information; he writes down the story he is told by Frankenstein who narrates the story he is told by the monster. Walton's narrative, like that of Frankenstein and the monster, and indeed any other narrative, can thus only claim a precarious patchwork status. By this disclosure the text of *Frankenstein* deconstructs hegemonial ideas of the knowable. In the same way, we have seen other supposedly knowable categories, that delineate what can count as natural, universal, or true crumble owing to the narrative technique of the novel.

In addition, patchwork can not only be observed and identified as a narrative technique in *Frankenstein* but – and this was the concern of Chapter 3 – it also emerges as the mode of creative production which is centrally dramatised in the story. It is constitutive for the development of that story as well as the novel that contains it and positioned in stark contrast to theories of original creation. Patchwork as a poetological programme is therein recognisable once more as a monstrously dangerous design, in this case, because it threatens the status of the author, at least as advocates of genius and their conceptions of authorship entailing autonomous creation and absolute possession of the literary work would determine it.

Because theories on genius depended on ideas of inherent privilege to rationalise their claims of an author's exclusive and superior position, they were much more accessible and utilisable for those already provided with another privileged position, a position also construed as a birth right, that of being male in a patriarchal society. As I have argued in Chapter 4, the female author confronted with a male canon and literary tradition as well as simultaneously with the

impossibility to create out of void, that both Shelley and Frankenstein encounter, is caught up in a serious dilemma the solution to which she may find in patchwork. Unable to create without the use of pre-existing materials but finding these materials inadequate because they stem from patriarchal discourses that encode woman as inferior and exclude female voices and perspectives, the destruction that precedes the reconstruction, the cutting that precedes the sewing when producing a patchwork, offer the female writer operations with which these discourses can be dismantled. Patchwork as a mode of literary creation provides a strategy to subvert dominant discourses that would define woman as a category of inferiority, domesticity and silence. Monstrous as the patchwork is in its composition and effects it throws that category and encoding of the feminine into crisis: she who should remain in the domestic space and sew, by sewing manages to infiltrate the public sphere withheld from her and to communicate what social convention would have her withhold.

5.1 Textile Voices: the Female, the Monster, and the Other

Textile work, to recall my introductory thoughts, has been connoted and encoded as a domestic feminine activity since antiquity, as was exemplified by the stories about Arachne, and about Philomela and Procne. Textile work – the narratives of those weaving women in the *Metamorphoses* clearly indicate this – can also instead of limiting woman to the domestic sphere offer a possibility to communicate herself publicly. It can be repurposed in order to weave the female text that would otherwise remain unwritten and unread. The female textile text, as it can be found in the Ovidian texts and as is recalled by Shakespeare later, has tremendous potential to subvert dominant narratives of rightfulness and righteousness of male and divine superiority. Shelley's *Frankenstein*, too, presents as a textile text and possibly one of especial radicality because as a patchwork it does not seek to hide but presents and performs in the tension between its incoherent patches that they were forcefully extracted from other texts and contexts. The beliefs, assumptions, messages and meanings of those pre-existing texts and contexts, once displaced, can thus as patches in the new work be shown to be not as sacrosanct as they might have been formerly staged. Therefore, as I have argued, patchwork is both a necessary and remarkably suitable strategy for a female writer who has to deal with the fact that she is writing from without and against dominant male discourses, in

which she can neither fully (or not at all) partake, nor can she fully (or at all) ignore them. However, I want to qualify, that even though I speak of textile patchwork as culturally encoded female and literary patchwork as tied to positions of femininity, my objective is not to postulate patchwork as a form of *écriture féminine* in the sense of Hélène Cixous[29]. Because my focus in this paper lay on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* – a text, as we have seen, which is deeply concerned with female subjectivity and the intersection of monstrosity, textuality, the textile, and femininity, and a text which was written by a woman – my inquiry consequentially focused on female authorship and literary creation. To work by detaching, patching, reattaching and stitching in order to be able to write, communicate, and express one's own subjectivity at all should, I think, be understood as a necessary, perhaps even unavoidable, often preferable and highly productive strategy for all individuals excluded from and oppressed by dominant discourses. The processes and operations of patchwork that I have outlined in this work are akin to those of postcolonial rewritings making use of the materials of the dominant Western cultures, but revising them, replacing certain elements, reverting perspectives, and subverting original meanings to communicate an experience of Otherness.[30]

Indeed, while my inquiry throughout this thesis and especially in Chapter 4 concentrated on and was guided by an interest in female Otherness, Otherness in *Frankenstein* does not just arise from a position of femininity. It is allocated, too, to the non-Western, non-European, allegedly non-civilised, when Walton compares the monster to "a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island" (Shelley 2012: 14). The text further addresses, not just male, but European hegemony when the creature as monstrous Other weeps "with Safie over the hapless fate" of the Native Americans, the non-European Others, when eavesdropping on Felix' history lessons (see Shelley 2012: 83). In the figure of Frankenstein's monster the 'non-male' and the 'non-European' and the 'non-human' coalesce. And in this embodiment of several categories of Otherness together with its visible patchwork condition, it is dangerous. True to the description of *monstrum* it is assigned and to the etymological roots of that description (see Cohen 1996: 4), the creature by its

[29] See The Laugh of the Medusa Hélène Cixous; Keith Cohen; Paula Cohen *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4. (Summer, 1976), pp. 875–893.
[30] For example, *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, J.M. or Coetzee's *Foe*, which recasts *Robinson Crusoe*. On rewriting as a strategy in postcolonial texts see Döring, Tobias. 2008. *Postcolonial Literatures in English.* Stuttgart: Klett.

very body but also in the story it tells reveals that it was *made* a monster. The made can be unmade and remade differently – that is the realisation a patchwork inevitably forces on the beholder. Woman, savage, monster, Other are not born but made as they are (mis)attributed to these categories by a hegemonic system. And the patchwork monster that refuses "to participate in the classificatory 'order of things'" threatens that system.

5.2 Cutting Off, Sewing On: Adaptations of Shelley's *Frankenstein*

That Shelley's monster and the monstrous novel were actually and acutely perceived as threatening 'the order of things' stands out particularly pronounced in a contemporary review in *Edinburg Magazine* from March 1818. The writer of this review is deeply troubled by *Frankenstein*'s less than reverent, free reutilisation of religious ideas and materials:

> It might, indeed, be the author's view to shew that the powers of man have been wisely limited, and that misery would follow their extension, – but still the expression "Creator," applied to a mere human being, gives us the sort of shock with the phrase, "the Man Almighty," and others of the same kind, in Mr Southey's "Curse of Kehama." All these monstrous conceptions are the consequences of the wild and irregular theories of the age; though we do not at all mean to infer that the authors who give into such freedoms have done so with any bad intentions. (*Edinburgh Magazine* 2012: 236)

Less bluntly dismissive than Croker – who, as mentioned previously, decried the novel as "absurditiy" and mockingly wondered whether the (at the time still anonymous) "author, notwithstanding the rationality of his preface," was not "as mad as his hero" (Croker 2012: 218) – the reviewer from *Edinburgh Magazine* is more willing to give *Frankenstein* the benefit of the doubt: he or she is shocked by the novel's "monstrous conceptions", yet senses, too, that monstrosity is a site of contestation, tension and negotiation, where "wild and irregular theories of the age" are at play. Two plainly contesting theoretical directions that manifest in Shelley's "monstrous conceptions" are, as I discussed in Chapter 3, those in favour and those in doubt of originality. And their respective representatives, the proponents and opponents of the idea of originality were split in particular on the question of whether an individual was determined by acquisition or endowment. Which of the

two the reviewer from *Edinburgh Magazine* would have counted among the "wild and irregular" ones becomes clear, as we read what follows the just quoted passage:

> This incongruity, however, with our established and most sacred notions, is the chief fault in such fictions, regarding them merely in a critical point of view. Shakespeare's Caliban (though his simplicity and suitableness to the place where he is found are very delightful) is, perhaps, a more *hateful* being than our good friend in this book. But Caliban comes into existence in the received way which common superstition had pointed out; we should not have endured him if Prospero had created him. (*Edinburgh Magazine* 2012: 236)

What is voiced in this passage is precisely the troubling and threatening effect of perceivable constructedness of a patchwork/monster which I have earlier described. For the person who wrote this review (and presumably for other contemporary readers, too) the unbearable characteristic of Frankenstein's monster is that it was not born but *created*. That its monstrosity was manmade.

The suspicion that there are tendencies in *Frankenstein* which were perceived as a cultural threat by a more general public and that "the moral outrage provoked among *Frankenstein*'s more pious readers" (Baldick 2012: 244) might have been accompanied by an anxiety of the text's potential to upset the established order of things thickens when we turn our attention to the earliest adaptations of Shelley's material. "The first dramatic version of *Frankenstein* appeared in 1823 with the staging of Richard Brinsley Peake's *Presumption: or the Fate of Frankenstein* […]" (Baldick 2012: 244). This version, according to Chris Baldick, aimed at transforming Shelley's story into a moralising tale (see 2012: 245) and thus produced also a much tamer, watered-down tale with regards to the subversive potential that, as I have endeavoured to show, inheres in the novel of *Frankenstein*. I have argued that this potential is due to the patchwork nature of Shelley's work and that the destabilisation of certainties that takes place in this patchwork is due to the contrast, tensions, and contradictions between mismatching patches. To test the defensibility of my claim, the following question could be asked: What happens when patches are taken out of the work, when but one patch remains? If the unsettling ambiguity disappeared in such a case, that would reaffirm that it was indeed produced by and within the patchwork. Precisely that case is played out in the first stage adaptation of Frankenstein.

> […] Peake makes several minor alterations in the story […], but the important changes are the dropping of Walton's frame narrative and above all the silencing of the monster, who in this version has, as Frankenstein tells us, 'the mind of an infant' (FRD, 7). The monster is still responsive to music, he discovers the mixed blessings of fire, and he chops wood for the De Laceys, but he is never allowed to develop beyond blind power and rage, still less to learn of human language and customs before he is buried with his creator in an avalanche. From a sensitive critic of social institutions, the monster has been transformed into a rampaging embodiment of Victor's unleashed 'impiety', who is never given a hearing. In short, he is assimilated firmly into the traditional role of the monster as a visible image of presumptuous vice." (Baldick 2012: 245)

To make Shelley's material acceptable to a theatre audience, Peake seems to have felt the need to defuse the story. And interestingly, the elements that are lost in this defusion, are some of those elements we have identified as most central to and constitutive of Shelley's literary patchwork: contrasting narrative voices, the creature's ability of learning and language acquisition, as well as in consequence its ability to tell that it was *made* a monster not just in the bodily sense, but that the moral monstrosity it later exhibits was not innate but *produced* by external social attributions and rejections. Soon after it opened its dull yellow eyes to the world and drew a first rattling breath on the pages of the anonymously published novel of 1818, Frankenstein's monster has procreated, has persisted and multiplied, has repeatedly been cut open and stitched back together to be again torn apart and again patched up. The history of *Frankenstein* adaptations and reception offers a rich field for future investigation, for it is first and foremost a history of the adaption and reception of a monster. Of course, adaptations per se are richly insightful research objects, because they open up a perspective on the reception of the adapted work at a certain time and in a certain cultural, social, and political context. How a monster was received and reproduced discloses much about that culture's beliefs, norms, anxieties, fears, and taboos. For as Cohen states in the first of his seven theses on monster culture: "The Monster's Body Is a Cultural Body" (Cohen 1996: 4). He goes on to explain: "The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place" (Cohen 1996: 4). What was Frankenstein's monster thought to and allowed to reveal or warn against at a certain time in a certain culture? What aspects of its monstrosity

were rejected by audiences at different points in time? Which aspects of its monstrosity were disguised or altogether deleted in certain adaptations and why? These are questions that would certainly merit further thorough examination. I, for now, must leave them as prospects. Frankenstein's monster lives on and will continue to do so – in various and varying forms, through changes made to it and charges made against it – that can be revisited some other time.

One of its most troubling features, one of the most troubling features of Shelley's novel – the textile patchwork form – is being revisited by authors like Shelley Jackson and Jeanette Winterson. When they reuse and rewrite Shelley's text, construct their intertextual and non-linear narrative patchworks, break with established traditions, when they produce a sense of multiplicity and instability by means of the form of their self-reflexive, metafictional texts, they find the basic patches and patterns for their postmodern concerns, conceptions of authorship, modes of literary production and strategies of subversion already provided in Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The text of *Frankenstein* and Frankenstein's monster – because they are both patchworks – offer themselves up to endless reworkings. Each adaptation, each play, film, comic book, and cartoon is busy with a patchwork of their own: taking up some of Shelley's threads cutting off others, borrowing some patches from *Frankenstein*, adding new ones, and continuing the operations of de- and recontextualization, sewing on. In these patched works, though they may work toward different goals and effects, every patch works.

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