

TAKING A RISK:

WOUND-READERS: DERRIDA AND FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER*

Luis Othoniel Rosa

Duke University

to avi 463

It has often been argued, in the wake of poststructuralist theory, that interpretation is a violence inflicted by the reader upon the text; that interpretation closes the possibilities of the text; that interpretation, because it aims at capturing the meaning of a text, ignores its formal and contextual aspects. A paradigmatic example of how we have charged against interpretation, is the now classic 1964 essay "Against Interpretation," in which Susan Sontag, full of the rebellious and contagious spirit of the sixties, and the rising of the poststructuralist thought, triumphantly proclaims that "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." More than forty years later, at least for this reader, it is still impossible to contend with those who were against interpretation during the sixties and seventies. Yet, now that the euphoria of the times has subsided, and those works inscribed in that tradition have been canonized (Derrida, de Man, Levinas, et al.), we have forgotten that in their original project there was no higher truth found in reading against interpretation, and that the "opened wound" of reading against interpretation is always painful. The wounding of reading, a metaphor coined by Derrida, Gadamer, and Celan (as we will see later in this paper) seems to refer to an aspect of reading that pertains to a different metaphorical register than that of the Enlightenment, which uses the metaphor of light or illumination to refer to knowledge. In reading there are also dynamics that rather than illuminating the reader with a higher truth, harms him. It is an aspect of reading that cannot be reasoned with and that refers not to the world of ideas, but to world of the body. We could think about the wounding of reading in the terms of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which trauma is a wound that opens up the membranes of an organism to the point that one does not know if the wound came from the inside or

the outside, and thus the subject of the trauma can no longer identify with clarity the limits between his subjectivity and the world. By analogy, the wounding in reading is a reproduction of the traumatic by which the text inflicts a trauma on the reader, and the reader can no longer know if the trauma came from the text, or if the text just invoked a trauma that was within the reader, and thus a crisis of subjectivity arises. We could think of interpretation as a closing of the wounds of reading, since interpretation captures and fossilizes the meaning of a text.

My argument is that we have forgotten how high the stakes are when reading against interpretation, and how much violence the text can deploy over a reader that reads against interpretation. We need to deessentialize the wound of reading in order to see the real stakes and the real risks of our reading against interpretation. In this paper, I offer two examples to support my argument against the essentialization of the “wounded-reading.” As examples go, I offer what I consider to be a good example of a reading against interpretation and a bad or counter example.

464 As a good example, I would like to discuss a late essay by Jacques Derrida, in which Derrida ventures into the hermeneutic tradition (the same one that, in 1964, Sontag rejects) to read a poem by Paul Celan. In this essay, published in 2003, it is interesting to see how perhaps the greatest philosophical enemy of the hermeneutic tradition and interpretation textually invites Hans-Georg Gadamer (one of the most important thinkers of the hermeneutic tradition) to form part of his “reading expedition.” Derrida simultaneously invites and rejects the hermeneutic tradition into his work, in the configuration of what remains a very rare text in his corpus of work, as I will try to prove. As the bad, or counter, example of reading against interpretation I take the Monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The monster reads various texts in his hovel (Goethe, Milton, Plutarch) and he is incapable of distancing himself from the characters in the books he reads. I argue that it is this lack of interpretation that enacts the violence of the text. The monster is also the metaphor of a big wound patched together.

How risky can reading be? How high are the stakes? I will depart on a reading expedition—depart on an expedition but also part with it, fragmenting it. Each fragment is a digression in the reading expedition, probing different approaches with different stakes.

I. DERRIDA’S “RAMS” AS A PERFORMANCE OF A FORT-DA WITH HERMENEUTICS

A. Fort-da between hermeneutics and deconstruction

To leave the undecidable undecided, this is Hans-Georg Gadamer’s bold step according to Derrida. It is a risk for interpretation, a way of testing the limits of hermeneutics, where at the end of the dialogue, agreement is as valuable as truth

itself. Derrida starts his essay on Paul Celan, "Rams," by reconstructing Gadamer's arguments on Celan. "[Gadamer] then takes a *bold, adventurous* step," he writes (143, my emphasis). Derrida is reading a text by Gadamer in which Gadamer is reading a poem by Celan, in which a reader is trying to read the palm of a hand that is closed or about to be closed. Derrida understands this moment as a threat for hermeneutics. "Without this *threat*, this *risk*, without this improbability, without this impossibility of proving—which must remain infinitely, and which must not be saturated or *closed* by any certainty—there would be neither reading nor giving nor blessing" (Derrida 145, my emphasis). Derrida identifies the moment in which hermeneutics struggles with indeterminacy, not as the end of hermeneutics, but as its precondition. In this sense, Derrida starts his essay by doing justice to the hermeneutic tradition that often has been thought of as the analytic opposite of deconstruction. Derrida invites us to go back to Gadamer's text to understand the complexities of the hermeneutic way of reading. It is often thought that deconstruction deals with the indeterminacy of a text while hermeneutics deal with the truth and meaning of a text. This is of course a very reductive characterization of these schools of criticism. When we go back to Gadamer we find that "what matters is the meaning of the ambiguity and indeterminacy stirred up by the poem. Such meaning does not invite the reader's whim and fancy; it is the very center of the hermeneutic struggle demanded by these verses" (Gadamer 128). Hermeneutics is not a simple game of deciphering the clues that the poet gives you. It is not an analytical game of chess, but rather the conjoined job between the writer and the reader to find the meaning of what is indeterminate from the very beginning. Indeterminacy is what makes the hermeneutic reading adventurous.

465

Inversely we can imagine that the interpretation of truth and meaning is the risk for deconstruction. Interpretation is what makes deconstruction adventurous. Interpreting the text presupposes the assimilation of its radicality in order to clarify its meaning, whereas deconstruction works with the excess of the text, with what remains necessarily undecidable within its legibility. It is not that deconstruction is beyond interpretation or that it frees us from interpretation; that is not possible. Interpretation is inscribed in our language. It is unavoidable. Without it, there is no intelligibility; the illusion of communication is at stake. It is too easy, often suspicious, to think that deconstruction stands in an opposition to hermeneutics. Nevertheless, as the reader can tell, it is a very thin line. The work of deconstruction, in order to be possible, must not succumb to the comfortable pleasures of interpretation. It must carry on the task of what is necessarily not understandable and wholly other. That is to say, it must carry out an impossible task. This is why Derrida on Gadamer is also a bold step for deconstruction.

Derrida appropriates the hermeneutic tradition in a deconstructive way. It is his own "bold, adventurous step," as can be seen in the following quote. Derrida is very careful when inviting the hermeneutic tradition to assist him in his deconstructive reading. "In speaking of a dialogue, I use a word that I confess will remain, for a thousand reasons, good or bad (which I will spare you), *foreign* to my lexicon, as

if belonging to a *foreign* language, whose use would provoke *translations* a bit off, requiring *precautions*. By specifying above all ‘interior dialogue’, I am delighted to have already let Gadamer speak in me” (Derrida 136, my emphasis). He lets Gadamer in him, not without warning us about the dangers. One can see how cautious Derrida is when inviting Gadamer to speak “in him,” “with him,” in that “interior dialogue.” Hermeneutics will henceforth act as a foreign body within this deconstructive work. It will change Derrida’s text. We could call this a copulative circuit of readings whereby one text invades the other, and reproduces, a text that is carrying another inside, like carrying a child. The copulative reading is the one that reproduces what is being read in a way that is never the same. And this is the reason we have such a hybrid and very strange text in “Rams.”

In this text Derrida works carefully with the tools of hermeneutics. At one point, it seems that he is just applying Gadamer’s method in *Who Am I and Who Are You?* to interpret a poem by Celan that is not considered in Gadamer’s book. It looks, perhaps for the first time in his extensive oeuvre, like Derrida is “applying” theory rather than “doing” theory. However, there are many moments in the text in which Derrida makes clear the differences between his approach and Gadamer’s. For example, in the following quote, Derrida points to the disseminal reading that works with the excess of the poem. “The excess of this remainder escapes any gathering in hermeneutics” (149) he says.

As we can see in his words, there is a strange relationship with hermeneutics. He lets it in but he also rejects it. The double play of rejection and introjection should suggest something to us, especially since Derrida works with those same terms throughout his text, not to talk about Gadamer but about Paul Celan. Derrida also brings the Freudian topic of the “fort-da” into his reading of Celan. The fort-da game is a manifestation of repetition compulsion by which one reenacts a traumatic experience. Freud first identifies this phenomenon in the infantile games of his grandson, where the child repeats the trauma of been left alone by his mother by throwing a toy out of sight and recovering it. In a way, Derrida is himself performing the fort-da repetition compulsion in his essay by rejecting hermeneutics (as if it were the child’s toy) and bringing it back. We should thus begin our reading of Celan in the ambiguous warning of interpretation, in this double play of hermeneutics and deconstruction.

B. Philology interrupts: Derrida reading Gadamer reading Celan

My argument is that Derrida’s fort-da play with hermeneutics is already inscribed in the main object of study of his essay (a poem by Paul Celan), that is to say, that the wound of reading is already in his reading of Celan and that it reproduces itself with Gadamer. This constant reproduction of the fort-da traumatic dynamics is what I call a copulative reading circuit. I also argue that Paul Celan’s poem, read through the lenses of Derrida and Gadamer, can show the high political and ethical stakes of their readings. Thus, now we must engage in our own reading of Celan’s poem, not forgetting that it is the main object of study of Derrida in “Rams” and that Gadamer

wrote a very well-known book on Paul Celan before Derrida (Gadamer, *Who Am I and Who Are You?*).

Derrida starts his reading of Celan with what is now a very famous last verse of one of Celan's poem that I include in its entirety as an appendix. We can start with examining the verbs of the poem, particularly the last one "Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen" ("The world is gone, I must carry you). The German word "tragen" has a possible meaning that is not discussed in Derrida's text. We can hear echoes of the Spanish verbs *tragar* (to swallow) and *traer* (to bring), as well as the English verb "to drag." All of them have a common Latin root; *tractare* (to pull, to bring). With this we can already see a fort-da game happening in Celan's poem. If we take the end of the first half of Celan's verse and the end of the second half we have fort-tragen (*fort-tragen*, literally, to carry away). This is a pushing and pulling game, a play of rejection and introjection. The first verb of the poem (in a gerund form) is *wühlenden* (rooting or pushing), which pairs perfectly with this possible meaning of "tragen," the last verb of the poem. Pushing and carrying are the two central dynamics of this poem. Everything happens between these two words, and as we will see, the world itself happens and ceases to exist between these two verbs in the poem.¹

467

From this point of departure (the pulling and pushing dynamics within the poem) we can read the entire poem in a different way. Derrida, in another example of his own pushing and pulling game with hermeneutics, starts his analysis of this poem in a methodical and hermeneutic fashion, very unusual in his work. He divides his reading of the poem in four categories according to the four different punctuation marks that divide the stanzas of the poem, forming four groups of meaning according to his reading: "1) the tableau, 2) the action, 3) the negative question, 4) the verdict." Derrida will later dismiss this methodical analysis for not being "risky" enough, and turn to a more deconstructionist type of reading.² He first assumes the methodical reading and then rejects it. For now, let us follow the initial, methodical reading of the poem, before we venture into the deconstructionist way. This is the first stanza of Celan's poem, "Grosse, Glühende Wölbung," the one that Derrida identifies as "the tableau."

Vast, glowing vault
 With the swarm
 of black stars pushing them-
 selves out and away:

We can start by asking ourselves about the light contrast. What is usually dark is glowing and what is bright is black. This swarm of stars (Abraham's seed, suggests Derrida) leaving this glowing vault (they must be getting "out" of something) seems like an explosion, like the origin of the universe itself, when everything is distancing itself, like a big bang (out and away, departing, parting with and fragmenting itself). This huge vault is no longer a closed space, or at least it is not containing the stars that are the origin of its glow (it can also be a funeral pyre). The vault is no longer a place of

death but it seems like an invaginated place. This might explain the contrast between the glowing vault and the black stars. What is being born already has the inscription of death and what contains death is full of light. The stars are pushing themselves out. This can be read as a coming out and a rejection of the maternal.

onto a ram's silicified forehead
 I brand this image, between
 The horns, in which,
 In the song of the whorls, the
 Marrow of melted
 Heart-oceans swells.

468 This is the second stanza of the poem, one that Derrida identifies as "the action." From the scene of the pushing out and away we immediately go to the forehead of a ram. Perhaps it is a birth metaphor. The ram is coming out to the world like the stars in the beginning of the universe. Derrida reads in these lines the horror of the sacrifice of Isaac (and the holocaust), and the ram as an Arian protestor. Here, for the first time, we have a first person. We have the 'I' that will come back in the last line. As for the "marrow of melted heart-oceans" we can once again follow the itinerary of in and out, or of the interior being exposed. The marrow or that which is at the core of something (the mother?) is now exposed in the forehead of a ram by the branding (brennen in German, we will come back to this) of the poetic voice. It is a similar movement to that of the stars coming out and distancing themselves from one another (growing in a way).

"To what does he not charge?"

Is this a rhetorical question or a riddle (supposing it is not an honest question)? Derrida calls this verse "the negative question." This ram, with a marrow (or mark, like in the German) melted in its forehead (perhaps marked by the burning of the poetic voice), either charges everything, or there is something against which it cannot charge. Following our reading, we might say that this is the moment in which what is being pushed out of the vault (that can be both a tomb, the place of the dead, or a womb, the place of the not yet alive, this is not decided) and into the world, must charge against anything that tries to contain it. It is the struggle for not being assimilated into what it just left behind. If we think about the poetic voice as a mother, the violence of this ram is also against the poetic voice that just "branded the image" in his forehead. The violence that is coming out of its womb is charging also against us, the readers that are trying to identify the mark of the author, a "mark" that the ram refuses. It is the alterity of the traumatic that breaks through any attempt of assimilation. It charges against everything in a negative question that sets the tone for the end of the world in the next verse: "The world is gone [fort], I must carry [tragen] you." And now we have reached the neuralgic point of the poem and of Derrida's essay, which he calls "the verdict." Discussing this last verse, Derrida starts the disseminative reading that works with the excess that, according to him, hermeneutics cannot

address. He explores various possible interpretations, without deciding on any of them. In addition, Derrida brings a different philosopher to bear on each of the possible interpretations, e.g., Freud, Husserl, Heidegger. We must pay attention to the way he opens up the text. Right when we were expecting a resolution, in the last few pages of "Rams," Derrida not just opens up the possibilities of interpretation, but he immediately puts the text in a circuit of thought (a circuit of readers) that could take our reading expedition in many different directions. But let us continue for the moment with this "ich" [I] that appears in the poem.

The first person appears for the second and last time. But who is it? The first time he only told us that he was the one "branding" or "burning" the image of the stars in the forehead of the ram. We might say that the "I" is the poetic voice, the one writing or giving birth to the poem that now is about to end. The "I" is the one that crafts the images. As images go, we have the stars pushing themselves out of a vast vault that seems like the creation of the universe. Then we have the poet branding/burning (*brenn*) this image onto the ram's forehead that could be read as a creature pushing his head away from the womb of the mother and growing into the world. Then we have the negative question in which one imagines this beast charging against something, perhaps everything, the world itself that was just created. It is what cannot be fully interiorized, what protests against the interior world of the vault (tomb-womb). It is also protesting the reader that is trying to contain it. Now we reach the end of the poem, and the end of the world itself. "The world is gone." Anything after that sentence is an encore. Like Aeneas carrying his father after the destruction of Troy, it is what comes after everything is over, after everything has been pushed out and/or taken away. Nothing remains inside. And yet the poetic voice must do something to contain that dispersion. Derrida gives two possibilities to explain the last and only "ich" of the poem. On the one hand, he reads it as a mother carrying the child not yet born in the loneliness of one body. She must keep carrying the baby, even if everything else is gone. On the other hand, he reads it as the dead one that must be remembered.

469

Both possibilities help us in our reading. The poetic voice must pull (*tractare*, *tragen*) that which is wholly other, that which does not pertain to the realm of the "I," or that which within the "I" is the soon to be other, the not yet alive. The "must" is the task of the impossible, like the impossible work of mourning in Derrida. Among the many books that Derrida wrote, it comes to mind the constant concept in his work of the "il faut," a fixed French expression indicating obligation, which can be rendered in English by something like "it must" but that in any case refers to an impersonal demand, a demand that does not come from anyone in particular, but that nevertheless imposes itself over the subject. When we look at the French translation of this verse we see that the last part is translated as "il faut que je te porte," the impersonal being imposed over the I.

C. "Il faut..."—*The ethical stand of reading*

Derrida begins his essay with this indication to the reader: "[t]o what I will now have the *temerity* to venture, listen only to the calls for help" (148, my emphasis). Still, why is there so much to lose, so much risk and "temerity"? Why is the task of reading apace with hermeneutics such a venture to Derrida? The answer might be hidden in our reading of Celan's poem. Derrida, approaching the final part of his essay, says that mourning is an idealizing introjection that ends in the good conscience of amnesia. Melancholia, on the other hand, is the "must" (*il faut*) of carrying and pulling the other that, in turn, resists and interrupts the idealizing introjection. Thus, we can think that the risk and "temerity" caused by hermeneutics to deconstruction corresponds to the fear of having the good conscience of understanding a text, of closing the wound, introjecting it and assimilating it to the empire of the knowable. It is the risk of affirmation as an end.

470 And yet, and yet, the interpretation "must" happen. The wound is only its condition of possibility. Derrida says it himself. Talking about Gadamer's method, he says: "This formal analysis can be taken very far. It must [*il faut*], in fact" (152). We are moving in and out of understanding, rejecting hermeneutics while being forced to use it, a fort-da game that is beyond any epistemological pleasure, yet, one could think that this is the best homage to Gadamer. In this sense, we could read Derrida's text in the series of essays he wrote after the death of some of the theorists of his generation like Paul de Man (*Memoires pour Paul de Man*) and Emmanuel Levinas (*Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas*). However, de Man and Levinas were two philosophers whose work is very close to that of Derrida's and they are often included as part of the deconstruction tradition. Gadamer is a more striking candidate for homage.

Reading Celan, Gadamer, and Derrida we realize that there is a lot of wounding in reading. Reading is like an electrical charge that chemically alters the constitution of the texts, creating infinite copulative circuits. Gadamer, when discussing another poem by Celan in which there is a horn that strikes like a "word-groove," and something "transporting" [carrying, pulling, translating] a "wound-read" (all are Celan's 'images'). He says "[w]ound-read" or wound driven, refers to a wound produced by a reading expedition that has lasted too long." What is being transported is a wound into the realm of words (107). In reading, as Frankenstein's Monster will show us, the text charges against the reader, opening a wound in which there is no longer a distinction between exteriority and interiority.

Derrida, when talking about the caesura between hermeneutics and the "disseminal experience," says that "such a gaping belongs neither to the meanings, nor to the phenomenon, nor to the truth, but, by making these possible in their remaining, it marks in the poem the hiatus of a wound whose lips will never close, will never draw together" (152-3). Truth, meaning and interpretation for Derrida, are only possible after the open wound of reading that allows them to be.

What we are approaching through the fort-da game is the politics of a melancholic reading, or perhaps reading as a politics of melancholia. The politics arrive in the

moment of the “must,” the drive to carry and to introject the other, the imperative of closing the wound and keeping it open at the same time, the melancholic rejection of any type of good conscience that comes after closure. Finally, Derrida’s way of reading keeps the possibilities (the wounds) open, yet also has the ethical stand of communicability that can only happen through a certain, inevitable, assimilation through interpretation. That is to say, the wound is not essentialized and it is not the aim of the deconstructionist reading to just identify the wound in a text, or its moment of undecidability. The wound is not the end of the deconstructionist reading but its point of departure. The ethical demand for communicability is the attempt at assimilating the text, assuming its wounding in an infinite attempt at closing the wound. Deconstruction, in this sense, is not about wounding, but quite the opposite. It is about assuming the trauma and the wound of the text being read in order to offer a remedy that is always insufficient. Interpretation is this remedy, even for deconstruction. Now, I would like to offer a counter example of what a reading without the remedy of interpretation looks like. The Monster is my counter example of what deconstruction cannot become.

471

II. FRANKENSTEIN’S MONSTER AS A READER WITHOUT INTERPRETATION

In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein, the creator of the monster, after a long season of mourning the death of his mother finds himself far away from home conducting “graduate studies” on chemistry and biology. His strange sort of dissertation project becomes a giant monster made out of the unequal bodily parts of different corpses. The different body parts of the monster are often represented in film adaptations as stitched together. We could think of the monster as a large wound, where the idea of subjectivity and identity is in crisis, since nothing is actually his; everything is borrowed in the monster. Victor’s studies are also a patchwork of different scholarly traditions (the old alchemists with the modern positivists), and in this sense the monster is also a wonderful metaphor for intertextuality. It is with an electrical charge that Victor gives life and unicity to the assemblage of different corpses that is the body of the monster. However, the monster, as we will continue to see in the novel, does not have a distinct personality until he comes upon four books. Looking at these books the monster learns to speak various languages. He reads Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, he reads Plutarch’s *Lives*, he reads Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and lastly, he reads the account of his own birth in the form of Victor’s diary. If electricity gave life and cohesiveness to his body, it is these books that give cohesiveness and identity to his subjectivity, albeit a fragile one.

My general argument about the monster as a reader is that the monster in *Frankenstein* does not seem to be able to reject anything that he reads. His violence is not the violence of interpretation and assimilation, but rather the other way around.

His violence is the product of his incapacity to interpret at all. The monster becomes what he reads without offering any resistance and it is, I will argue, because of what he reads that he becomes a murderer. This kind of reading without interpreting is also evident when Victor recounts his reading of the alchemists, whose pseudo-science he reads literally as being truths.

A. "Where do babies and stories come from?"

Barbara Johnson, in her reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, notes that both the origin of the book and the origin of the monster came from a rainy night and the influence of books (2). It is on a rainy night that Victor Frankenstein finds the volume of Cornelius Agrippa and the alchemists that prompts him to begin research into the secret of life. It is also on a rainy night that Mary Shelley, along with Lord Byron and Percy Shelley, reads a volume of ghost stories that provoked the famous contest from which the novel originates. This is how Johnson links the monstrous creation of Victor to the book, the layers of autobiographical male narrations (Walton, Victor, the Monster) to Shelley's own autobiography. The description of this primal scene of creation is what Johnson identifies as the knot of the book. "Where do babies and stories come from?" she asks (Johnson 4). Although Johnson insists that this question is described but not answered in the novel, we could attempt a response with our idea of the copulative aspect of reading. It is in a reading context that Mary Shelley gives birth to the book, it is from within a similar reading context that Victor is inspired to give birth to the monster. The monster is also a reader, no less. Reading is the constant action of this epistolary novel, and perhaps the monstrosity comes from the enormous overflow of texts and fragments, just as the monstrosity of the monster comes from the hideous asymmetry of his unequal body parts.³ After we pass through all the narrative layers of the book, at the core of the novel, we find the monster telling the story of his auto-identification, of how he came to the realization of his narrative conflict and hubris. He finds this arc, as I said before, while reading four books in his warm hovel: Plutarch's *Lives*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Victor Frankenstein's diary. The conflict that the monster engineers for himself and that will later become the cursor of the novel's climax, might be well summarized in a phrase he utters when reporting his reader response of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* to Victor, his creator. He chooses the autobiographical type of response, the one that starts with "I think" and continues with a personal story in which you compare yourself to the main character. He finally arrives at the biggest difference between himself and Goethe's young Werther: "'The path of my departure was free' and there was none to lament my annihilation" (109). Whereas Werther's suicide in Goethe's novel with Albert's gun is aimed at the love that both Lotte (his impossible beloved) and her husband (Albert) felt for him, the monster had none to mourn his death. This is what sets the stage for the eventually bloody request for a companion in *Frankenstein*. The monster demands the care and responsibility of his creator. Yet, the monster's argument is only a part of what inter-

ests me in this sentence.

If my argument is that this primal scene that Johnson identifies as the highest stake of the novel finds its answer in the act of reading, then it is important to notice that the monster's statement of identity, differentiation and hubris, has a quotation from Percy Shelley in the middle, identified by citation marks. So at the core of the novel, after all the readings of books, letters, diaries and autobiographies, when a character is finally going to tell a story that is not just an excuse for another story, when we are about to read a solid and original argument that will be the foundation of the novel and its mark of authenticity, we get a reading of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and a quotation from the lover, partial editor and, arguably, censurer of the author.

As I did with Derrida's text, I will go over the scenes of reading in the novel but always going back to a close reading of the monster's statement of differentiation. My itinerary will focus on the production of subjectivity in the act of reading, and the important link to trauma. For this reading, I propose to enlist the work of Emmanuel Levinas as an aid.

473

B. A fragmented auto-identification

Levinas writes, "the uniqueness of the responsible ego is possible only in being obsessed by another, in the trauma suffered prior to any auto-identification, in an unrepresentable before" (*Otherwise* 123). Levinas calls this trauma an "anarchic trauma," apparently suggesting the possibility of another trauma that is governed by a certain order or authority. He is trying to make clear that the anarchic trauma, set in a perpetual anteriority, is not the product of a causality or an event, but that it is before any possible causality. It is a trauma that is always already there, before the creation of the world, and before any identity. Indeed, the trauma is both a rupture and a condition of possibility for identity, both fragmentation of the ego and the assemblage of its uniqueness. We could think of it as the wounding that Derrida identifies as the condition of possibility of all reading.

It is in the monster's hovel, a kind of womb (or vault, like Celan), where he suffers his first auto-identification and individuality through reading Milton and Goethe. He compares himself to Werther, Adam, and Satan. We could say that the monster learns his obsession from Werther. He, too, is obsessed with Lotte. This was the anarchic trauma that chose him, even before he could have his own beloved, the trauma that opened the wound of his subjectivity, both giving birth to him and violently dispersing any fiction of selfhood. But in this sort of "mirror stage" he tries to differentiate himself from these characters.⁴ He looks at himself in these books, before he actually knew what a self was. The books act as mirrors in which the reflection is what constitutes the original image and not vice versa. The monster models his character after these three, but he is not a copy of them; his tragedy is far worse. His creator despises him, he has no demons to keep him company, and "the path of his departure was free' and there was none to lament his annihilation." He comes out of

the hovel a unique character, although carefully molded by the other three, with fragments of them in his own existence, fragments of other texts imbedded in his corpus. Fragmentation is what constitutes the monstrosity of the creature. His maker, as he tells us in his diary, selected body parts from different corpses, thus no one part coincides with the other; there is no symmetry, or if there is one, it is only a very perverted and deformed one. The assemblage of textual and anatomic fragments that constitutes the monster's body is brought together by an electric charge, a current of energy that passed from one particle to the other creating a circuit of constant flux, an electric charge that Victor first learned through his readings of the Alchemists.⁵

C. The violence of reading against interpretation

Mary Shelley has obviously chosen with great care the books that the monster reads. She makes an effort to trace the literary genealogy and genesis of her monstrous character and to come up with a scene of auto-identification through the reading of these
 474 other books. As if this were not enough, she includes the actual narration of the monster's origin in the monster's reading list. In a way, the monster is reading a part of the book that we are actually reading with him. In reading the scientific diary of his creator, the monster is also reading Mary Shelley's novel, in an almost Cervantine fashion, like Don Quixote in the second part of the book reading the first part.⁶ The circuit of traumatic readings charges beyond the limits of the novel. It is not that fiction is confused with reality, but that reading proliferates the traumatic by presenting a conduit of transmission. The traumatic runs from the paper to the eye, in an electrodynamics of reproducible identifications.

Let us consider one more layer in this reading circuit. Surprisingly enough, the monster has also, arguably, read Percy Shelley. It is as if he were with the Shelleys in their love bed. The poem by Percy Shelley containing the verse that the monster quotes is previously quoted by Victor when he is going up the mountain to meet his creation. Both the creator and the creature quote the same poem in different instances. In a moment of melancholia Victor says: "if our impulses were confined to hunger, thirst, and desire, we might be nearly free: but now we are moved by every wind that blows and a chance word or scene that that word may convey us." Next he quotes the last half of Percy Shelley's poem "On Mutability":

We rest.—A dream has power to poison sleep
 We rise.—One wandering thought pollutes the day
 We feel, conceive or reason; laugh or weep;
 Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away:

It is the same!—For, be it joy or sorrow,
 The path of its departure still is free:
 Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;
 Nought may endure but Mutability

Perhaps the "chance word" that "moves" and changes our conception of the world

is literature itself, it is the poem that he proceeds to quote (and that I include in its entirety as appendix B). The mutability of life, the lack of consistency of our subjectivity, both Shelleys tell us, is triggered by a "chance word," or perhaps, by literature, literature interrupting life. Freedom, or the free flow of things (words, thoughts, lives), seems to be the *cause* of Victor's melancholy and the monster's tragedy. There is no constancy or support, no perennial state and no one to prevent or even mourn our annihilation. We rest, rise, and feel (like falling), but there is no final destination, no fixed emotional state, no security. On the other hand, if we accept Levinas' argument about the anarchic trauma we must be suspicious about this causality. Giving a turn of the screw to our reading of the story, we can make the argument that freedom is not the source of a trauma but the utmost hidden and repressed desire, the freedom from the subjection of the other.

Victor wants to create a self-sufficient being, a subject without subjection. We can even extend the argument to say that the monster is the repressed desire of Victor, unconsciously designed to "free" Victor from those that would mourn him, cutting all the attachments and affections, freeing the "path" for a non-mournable death, perhaps the ultimate act of love towards his loved ones. If we consider that immediately after he is scared to death by the face of his creation he dreams the kiss of death of his own beloved Elisabeth, we begin to see that the hypothesis of a repressed killing instinct might be sustainable, although it is not the intention of this paper. In this perverse reading, Victor's fantasy would be the monster's curse, and it would change the way we read the monster's lament "'The path of my departure was free' and there was none to lament my annihilation." The traumatic reading sets up (sets free) the violence, and there is no going back.

475

Returning to Shelley's poem, there is a slight change between its sense in the monster's use of the quote and its original sense. In the poem the path of its departure has freed not a person but a feeling or current emotional state in a person. "For be it joy or sorrow / the path of its departure is still free." Whereas the monster is talking about a perpetual loneliness and eventual death, Percy's poem is talking about the ephemeral state of emotions that are so easily changed by a "chance word." What we have between Percy's poem and the use that the monster makes of it is Mary's own reading. Mary reads her lover's poem about the mutability of feelings as a poem about extreme and deathly solitude. However, even in this extreme solitude she invites the text of another, or the other invades her solitude.

The inclusion of Percy's text is also a reading of Goethe's *Werther* in the novel. The climactic moment of Werther's love for Lotte, the scene in which the hero finally gives a free path to his obsession and death drive for his unattainable beloved, happens after Lotte and Werther are reading aloud a long passage of Ossian that Goethe includes in the book. So Goethe borrows from the *angst* of Ossian the same way as Mary Shelley and the monster borrow from Goethe and Percy Shelley. Like the trauma that breaks into the organism through a wound, where one can no longer tell if the pain comes from the inside or the outside, the effect of the quote within the

text does not allow us to identify a source or cause. The trauma is anarchic; it has no origin. Ossian within Goethe or Percy within Mary cannot be defined as an outside or inside agent of the narration.

D. The creator in debt or a bad mother

Levinas says that the “ethical I is a being who asks if he has the right to be, who excuses himself to the other for his own existence” (Kearny 62). As we all know, the monster’s claim is quite the opposite. Rather than excusing himself for his own existence, the monster, copying Milton’s Adam, blames his creator for his existence. God, like Victor, is in eternal debt to his creation. It is the old literary motif of the creator becoming the slave of his own creation. What *Frankenstein* brings to the table is a secular myth of origin in which the creator does not have the means to offer his creation a possibility of happiness, and everything comes crumbling down. Or even worse, a secular genesis in which the creation is condemned and slaved to the maternal mourning of the creator, making the myth of origin even more complicated.⁷

476

Now, what interests me about the “existence” of the monster is the possibility of reading him as an allegory of the horrifying and violent aspect of the face of the other. Of course, Levinas does not talk about horror when talking about the face of the other, but let us see what comes of this reading. In this novel, it is hard to identify what Levinas calls an ethical ‘I’. If there is plenty of correspondence, there seems to be very little responsibility. Responsibility in Levinas refers to a need to respond to the call of the other. As I said before, the obsessive call to respond to the other in this novel seems to translate into the need of erasing its trace, clearing and freeing the path to an unmournable death. Nonetheless, this very need to kill the loved ones might be the hidden act of love, or even the ethical ‘I’ that excuses himself for his own existence.

Victor has suffered (and suffers repeatedly throughout of the novel) the loss of a loved one, the unmournable melancholia that comes after the impossible experience of death.⁸ Perhaps by “freeing” the path of his annihilation through the hatred of his creation, he is saving his loved ones from the task of mourning him. Perhaps the act of love consists precisely in taking away the pain of mourning in others by killing them. Victor, then, commits the ultimate act of substitution. He takes the place of all those trying to mourn the lost mother and the other victims of the monster. It is only after he is absolutely sure that nobody will mourn him that he dies. The pain of his existence, of his right to be, is inexcusable to the point of annihilation.

There is a possibility I am taking this (over)reading too far afield. Nonetheless, in this novel I think we reach a dark and perverse aspect of the Levinasian responsibility for the other. Responsibility is not very sympathetic.

E. The Oedipal dismissal

Victor Frankenstein first conceives the idea of researching the “secret of life,” the first scene of reading that I mentioned above, when, bored one rainy night, he finds a

volume of Cornelius Agrippa and the alchemists. "Electrified" by these readings, he relates his discovery to his father, whose immediate response is to dismiss his excitement. He later tells Walton that it was this dismissal that spurred him to continue his research, a scholarly expedition that takes too long and that will end years later in a monstrous sort of dissertation topic. Thus, it is in the grips of this Oedipal urge to contradict the authority of his father and sole parent that Victor tries to create a new and lonely being. In the many doublings of the novel, we find a very similar scene to that of Victor with his father, but this time with Victor taking the place of the father while the monster takes the place of Victor. From books, the monster derives the idea of asking for a mate. He tells his father and creator about his readings and about his idea, but Victor refuses to even consider it. Victor dismisses the monster just as his father dismissed him, and it is a dismissal that triggers the deathly sequence of the novel.⁹ The authoritarian figure tries to repress the effect of the readings, but the otherness of the readings is contained within the language of the self. Even to express one's identity, one has to quote the other. The monster's irrational demand for a companion ignites his killer instinct. Yet, this irrational demand does not come from his own desire or "nature," but from his incapacity to distance himself from the text that ends up constituting him as a monstrous assemblage of fragments.

477

III. RISKS TAKEN

The path of my departure, the departed path, the exit path but also the path that is being fragmented and separated in its parts is free, it is open, it is up for grabs, but there is nobody willing to mourn, there is no possible closing of the wounds. Where should we keep carrying this reading when the path and the world are gone, where there is nothing outside and yet the solitude within is made of those outer fragments, where there is only the *il faut* of the *forttragen*, the rare proximity of a "you" that demands our responsibility, and there is no negotiation that will solve it? Reading in all of these instances brings something to the reader at the same time foreign and familiar. In the appropriation of the text the reader finds himself and at the same time finds the foreign aspect of his selfhood, his subjection to this otherness that constitutes its subjectivity. This proximity of the otherness of the text is traumatic. It is a wound in which we can no longer identify an interior self and an exterior world. Even if the monster's lament comes from an extreme solitude, the lament itself is charged by the proximity of the other. Like the loneliness in the last verse of Celan's poem, where the world is gone, the injunction of the "I must carry you" brings up the impossible proximity of the other. This is the great difference between the two examples of readers against interpretation: Derrida allows the texts that he reads to transform his text, yet has the ethical stand (the "I must") of interpretation; the Monster allows his readings to change him, yet refuses any attempt at closing the wounds.

The relation between reading, trauma, the other, and the subject creates an electri-

cal circuit that burns and chemically changes the constitution of its hosts, deforming them and at the same time giving them a life. If with Derrida and Gadamer we see the play between the fort-tragen of reading and interpretation, with the monster we have a far more radical form of reading in which the reader does not appropriate or reject, but where he himself is an appropriation of the fragmented. Although there is a play between introjection and rejection in Derrida that produces a reading in the limits of understanding, the monster does not limit the assimilation, introjection or interiorization of what he reads. The monster allows the reading to fully annihilate him and everything that he represents. In the monster the circuit of the traumatic burns every conduit, since there is no interpretation at all. The monster is the negative example of a reading without any interpretation.

NOTES

478

* Special thanks to Jeff Lawrence, Dora Zhang and Dylan Robbins who edited and discussed earlier versions of this essay with me.

1. There is yet another way of finding this hidden meaning of the poem's last word. In Romanian, perhaps Celan's native tongue, or the forgotten language, or the language that is being translated or transported to the German (appropriated and rejected), we have the verbs *a trage* or *tracere* with the same meanings, or the adjective *drag*, *draga*, *dragul* (dear). We can read here the irruption of the Romanian in the German, of the language of his native yet foreign country. I am not saying that this was the intention of the author, not even that it is an unconscious slippage. The text, Gadamer will tell us, has a meaning in itself, beyond any intention of the author. Understanding the poem—and here I am borrowing from Gadamer—requires the consideration of all its possibilities. “This is what prescribes the path of interpretation; one is not transported by the text to a world of meaning familiar in its coherence. Fragments of meaning seem to be wedged together; the path of transposition cannot be followed from one level of simple intentionality to a second level of actually being said. Rather, in a way which cannot be easily described, the actual utterance is always the same as what the speech intended” (Gadamer 131). Derrida analyses the German meanings of the word (carrying, and being pregnant, in which we can think of something being pulled in-out), but not the etymology or the possible Romanian trace.
2. “This formal analysis can be taken very far. It must, in fact. But it hardly seems risky.[...]the experience that I call disseminal undergoes and takes on, in and through the hermeneutic moment itself, the test of an interruption, of a caesura or of an ellipsis, of an inaugural cut or opening” (152).
3. In her hyper-text novel *Patchwork Girl*, Shelley Jackson rewrites Shelley's *Frankenstein* introducing the creature as an intertextual monster patched together.
4. See Jacques Lacan's “The Mirror Stage” in *Écrits*.
5. Peter Brooks, in his now classic reading of *Frankenstein*, defines the monstrosity of the creature as a “byproduct of the process of making meaning” and as an “excess of signification,” particularly focusing on the epistemophilic drive of Victor (the creator) who “pursues nature to its hidden places” (Brooks 218). In the drive to know the secrets of life, in the drive of “making meaning” is that the monster appears. I would add to Brooks reading that Victor's and the monster's search for meaning (the one reading science and the latter reading literature) are flawed from the beginning, since they are not able to interpret what they read. It is, in my understanding, this lack of interpretation what enables the excess of signification that constitutes the monstrosity.

6. Don Quixote would be an interesting third case to my two cases of readers in the limits of interpretation. Yet, contrary to the monster, for most of the two parts of Cervantes's novel, Quixote's lack of interpretation is inspiring and contagious as it changes the world around him.
7. Following Avital Ronell in her reading of *Frankenstein* in her *Telephone Book*, we could say that the monster is a technology to mourn and compensate for Victor's lost mother, for Victor being abandoned by his own mother and thus he becoming also a mother who abandons his child. Many feminist readings of *Frankenstein*, following Gilbert and Gubar's seminal works, have also noted the relation between Mary Shelley and her dead mother, Mary Wollstonecraft (see Sandra Gilbert, "Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve").
8. "Does the impossibility of reducing death to an experience, this truism about the impossibility of an experience of death, and about a non-contact between life and death—do these not signify a being affected, an affection more passive than a trauma? As if there were a passivity beyond shock." (Levinas, *Death* 10).
9. Peter Brooks identifies the Oedipal aspect of the novel through the epistemophilic drive of both Victor and the monster to know what is hidden. The Oedipal epistemophilia, as Brooks correctly argues, ends up in the pain of the body, in Oedipus taking his own eyes out. Here lies another beautiful metaphor of the wound in reading. If reading is the means for knowledge, what Shelley and Derrida show us is that in reading there is also pain.

WORKS CITED

- Acosta, Ana M. *Reading Genesis in the Long Eighteenth Century: From Milton to Shelley*. Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2006.
- Brooks, Peter. *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Celan, Paul. *Atemwende*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Rams. Uninterrupted Dialogue—Between Two Infinities, the Poem." *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*. Ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen. New York: Fordham UP, 2005.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth P, 1950.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Gadamer on Celan: "Who Am I and Who Are You?" and Other Essays*. Trans. Richard Heinemann and Bruce Krajewski. New York: State U of New York P, 1997.
- Gilbert, Sandra. "Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve". *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1979.
- Johnson, Barbara. "My Monster / My Self." *Diacritics* 12 (1982): 2-10.
- Jackson, Shelley. *Patchwork Girl*. Storyspace [Electronic Source]: Eastgate Systems, 1995. <http://www.eastgate.com/catalog/PatchworkGirl.html>
- Kearney, Richard and Emmanuel Lévinas. "Ethics of the Infinite." *Dialogues with*

Contemporary Continental Thinkers. The Phenomenological Heritage. Ed. Richard Kearney. New Hampshire, USA: Manchester UP, 1984.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English.* Trans. Bruce Fink. New York & London: W.W. Norton, 2006.

Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being.* Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 1998.

———. *God, Death and Time.* Trans. Bettina Bergo, ed. Jacques Rolland. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2000.

Ronell, Avital. *The Telephone Book: Technology—Schizophrenia—Electric Speech.* Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1989.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus.* New York: Signet Classics, 2000.

480

APPENDIX A

Mutability

by Percy Bysshe Shelley

We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;
How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,
Streaking the darkness radiantly! -yet soon
Night closes round, and they are lost for ever:

Or like forgotten lyres, whose dissonant strings
Give various response to each varying blast,
To whose frail frame no second motion brings
One mood or modulation like the last.

We rest. —A dream has power to poison sleep;
We rise. —One wandering thought pollutes the day;
We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep;
Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away:

It is the same! —For, be it joy or sorrow,
The path of its departure still is free:

Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;
Nought may endure but Mutability.

APPENDIX B

Grosse, Glühende Wölbung
mit dem sich
hinaus- und hinweg-
wühlenden Schwarzgestrin-Schwarm:

der verkieselten Stirn eines Widders
brenn ich dies Bild ein, zwischen
die Hörner, darin,
im Gesang der Windungen, das
Mark der geronnenen
Herzmeere schwillt.

481

Wo-
gegen
rennt er nicht an?

Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen