

The Monstrous as the Paradigm of Modernity? Or Frankenstein, Myth of the Birth of the Contemporary

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'Do you see this egg? It is with this that all the theological schools and all the churches of the Earth will be overturned.'

Diderot, *Entretien avec d'Alembert (Conversation with d'Alembert)*

About fifteen years ago I took a journey through the famous work of Mary Shelley, and the interpretation of her warning call. Let me say briefly why I am interested in Mary Shelley.

At the beginning of the 80s I was invited by a journal to reflect on what was totally new at that time: the birth of children conceived asexually and outside the body by *in vitro* fertilization. At that time very little work existed on these issues, though they were soon to generate a great deal of ink. The only publications to have appeared were Jacques Testart's very first book, *De l'éprouvette au bébé spectacle (From the test tube to the miracle baby)*, and René Frydman's *L'irrésistible désir de naissance (The irresistible desire for birth)*.

Just like the general public, I had heard of the sensational stories, but I did not know any more. I read those two books and quickly understood Jacques Testart's anxieties, in particular that the matter was important; indeed, these new advances constituted an inextricably linked mixture of beneficial and dangerous possibilities. How could anyone not be delighted that infertile couples could have a baby thanks to this artificial procedure? On the other hand, one would have to have been very naïve not to have felt that if the human race was able to desexualize its origins, then the event was of a greater significance than the simple bypassing of tubular sterility, that there were other motives that people were unaware of, and that it would not just stop there. I met the two authors. At the time, more than the events themselves, the words which accompanied them were already interesting me: for example, what violent emotion had prompted Jacques Testart to pin a notice to the door of his laboratory saying 'Jacques Testart, test-tube pragmatist'. Just what was 'Jacques the pragmatist' aware of? Was it simply those things concerned with the womb, the brutality of the treatment, which you must realize was a direct result of the industrialization of stock management?

I also read René Frydman's *L'irrésistible désir de naissance* and there again I had cause to reflect. What birth was he talking about? The desire for a child? Or another birth? The production of flesh? Or the advent of the word? Why was the term 'medicine of desire' found in that author's work when what he meant to say was 'medicine of convenience'? Indeed, no human emergency could explain the extraordinary battery of equipment

deployed to gain control over life. Has desire become an illness that has to be taken to a doctor to be treated, or even eradicated? Or was it just the unconscious object of the researchers' curiosity? As often happens, knowledge of the unconscious seemed to leave scattered around the very messages which it was supposed to conceal.

Thus I started this work with the most traditional tools of psychoanalysis, that is to say without losing sight of the sexual element and the impulsive desire, even when found in science, by listening to the words and the 'failures in discourse' and by making use of that marvellous concept bequeathed by Freud of the 'epistemophilical urge', the desire for knowledge which Freud showed was the sum of two urges: the scopic urge – the desire to see, and the urge for influence – the desire to control.

As far as the scopic urge is concerned, we know all there is to know about that. As for the urge to control, the two decades which were to follow would surpass everything that the history of humanity had been able to find out about the subject, and in a totally new form.

Indeed, no generation before ours had the power to extract its germ line from itself, freeze it and modify its characteristics. The sequencing of the human genome was soon to provide the meeting point between the techniques of *in vitro* fertilization and the possibilities of genetic quality control which Jacques Testart dreaded for their eugenic tendencies and their unleashing of powers unprecedented in history: what becomes of democracy when power extends to modifying the species?

I had found my subject. Namely the contemporary forms of this epistemophilia, not just descriptive as in the basic sciences, but experimental, modifying the real, so violent that they soon produced this extraordinary paradox: on the threshold of life, frozen embryos; at the end of life, warm corpses, as though it were at the most sensitive moments of human experience, birth, death and communication, moments which once upon a time were reserved for the great narratives, and against a background of their obsolescence, that experimentation was unleashed.

That too had been foreshadowed by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*, who made her young scholar write:

Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever, and I became nervous to a most painful degree, I could not tear my thoughts from my employment, which had taken an irresistible hold on my imagination (. . .) I paused, examining and analysing all the minutiae of causation, as exemplified in the change from life to death, and death to life . . . Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source (. . .)

But let us return to the laboratory, and to the children which the still new reproductive medicine endeavoured to conceive there. Jean Baudrillard asked a question, in *La transparence du mal (The transparency of evil)* (1990), which tormented me: how could we move from the issues of the 1970s, the maximum of sexuality with the minimum of reproduction, to the exact opposite, the maximum of reproduction with the minimum of sexuality, in less than ten years? I listened to what was being said in hospital corridors: 'how shall we deal with sterility – launch the plan that does away with sex?' joked the gynaecologists. 'Let us free ourselves from sexuality' declared an INRA (*Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique* [National Institute for Agronomic Research]) poster, in the agricultural department . . .

You can see how strange this is: at the beginning of the century, people were thinking about freedom through sexuality, at the end of the century, they wanted freedom from sexuality... Why? What discourse and what representations had our generation received on this adventure, the most aporetic of human experiences, a constant battle between relationships, duties and the rebellious autonomy of desire?

To snatch man away from reproduction through difference (we are born in a situation which condenses all differences, differences between the sexes and between generations, with their huge potential for love and conflict), was an old fantasy. Simply, the goal was in sight, it was about to be realized.

It was in this context, and taxed by these questions, that I read Mary Shelley. What is the story? A young scholar, carried away by the most recent discoveries of his time, has not found – either in his family or his studies – the answers to his questions on the world and himself, so he secretly makes a man by putting together organs collected in charnel houses, and gives him life by means of an electric shock. This man becomes a monster, deformed and cruel, but far from indulging in mechanical and anonymous violence, he attacks all those whom his creator cares for, as a means of reproach and vengeance. A product of possession and control, he becomes the compulsive murderer of love. Never given a name in the novel (Mary Shelley uses the words ‘devil’ and ‘creature’) an enthusiastic public baptized him with the name of Frankenstein, the scholar who made him. It is perhaps through this slippage of civil status, which conflates the scholar and the monster, that the intuitions contained in the novel conflate themselves into a myth, inviting the decoding of this mistake in naming.

Thus the scholar could merge with the monster; the monstrous could burst out from science, the artificial creature would threaten his creator, these are strange themes from this girl of the Enlightenment. (Shelley, her husband, affectionately called her ‘*child of the light*’). The daughter of two ‘strong spirits’ of the time, Mary Wollstonecraft, a pioneer of feminism, and William Godwin, a radical atheist philosopher, Mary is beyond suspicion of obscurantism, not in the least impressionable, cultivated and very well informed about the discoveries of her time. For her, having been brought up in the firmness of a rational education, scientific knowledge included absolutely nothing whatsoever that was reprehensible.

So, what did she see, what did she write, and in what circumstances?

Mary herself invites us to the work of decoding by writing in her introduction to the 1831 edition of her *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*: ‘Everything must have a beginning... and this beginning must be linked to something; invention, it must be humbly admitted, is not developed in the void, but in chaos.’

And it is indeed chaos which reigns in the life of the young woman at the time that she is writing her novel, and which torments her. Voluntary exiles, insecure and penniless, Mary, Percy Shelley, her companion, and their young son William, encumbered with Claire, Mary’s half-sister, joined the poet Byron, who had been banished from England for incest and sodomy, and his homosexual doctor, Polidori, in Geneva.

Two years earlier, Shelley, a great admirer of Godwin and a frequent guest at his house, had taken the two girls away, abandoning Harriet, his young pregnant wife, in London, along with their first child. At the time, Claire, who was jealous of her sister’s relationship with the poet, was pregnant by Byron, who for his part had left two women and two children in England: his wife and their daughter Ada, and his sister and their daughter Medora. Is not love a universal virtue, do not taboos raise obsolete prejudices which

reason should be able to counteract? And does not science work for the happiness of humanity through progress in knowledge?

It was in the absence of what separates them, what distinguishes them and what draws the boundary between the lawful and the unlawful, the possible and the impossible, the bearable and the unbearable, that *Frankenstein* was written, under the very sign of the question of boundaries.

The first surprise is that these adolescents resemble us; cut off from their fathers' traditions, backpackers before backpackers were invented, they travelled through France, Switzerland and Italy, seeking in the ideals of the French Revolution the tools to understand the world and themselves. Carried away by the conquests of reason, they expected it to give them access to total hedonism. When the contradictions are too violent, Shelley takes laudanum.

What tools are needed to survive the inevitable conflict between unlimited desire and duties when with a loved one? How can one love without causing harm since desire is fickle when one recognizes its law alone? Mary's universe has the aspirations of any adolescent generation: to be able to do everything, together with being able to desire everything. In microcosm she prefigures what was to confront our generation in a much bigger way.

Who am I? And who is the Other? And why do excessive amounts of otherness, desire and love seem to be governed by laws other than those to which reason allows compliance? Victor Frankenstein, motivated by the prodigious force of the desire to know, will defy the laws of nature in order to assuage his thirst for understanding the enigma which he himself is.

What did that 'child of the light', free from all prejudice as from all superstition, see which made her give such a warning cry? Mary never demonized science. For her, knowledge could not be evil and the area which reason could embrace was boundless. But she heard, in herself and in her companions, children completely in thrall to their ideas and their desires, the terrible temptation to ask science questions which were outside its province. She sensed with terror the enigma that man is for man and the extraordinary attraction that the emerging sciences constituted for asking that question, if not for resolving it. She anticipated the moment when 'know thyself' would no longer be read just on the pediment of the temple at Delphi but would be made real on a dissecting table. She had a premonition that what would give man the illusion that such an answer exists elsewhere and not in life, and that the destruction of man's humanity would come through the Other. She brought to light the passion, the obsessive desire for control behind the indisputable legitimacy of knowing. She glimpsed the subversion of reason and its silent and invisible transformation into rationalism, that supreme alibi of desire. She foresaw that the monstrous would be to make others the object which would dramatically reveal, in the cold light of the laboratory, the 'truths' of which it was the bearer. She had a premonition that such a devastating passion could only be so violent because it harboured an unformulated desire for knowledge of itself, and above all the illusion of the end of tensions inherent in the human adventure. She dreaded the arrival of a time when experience and its uncertain communication would be over: when a time of experimentation would come. Narratives would be finished, together with their metaphors, fumbling approximations, obscure images, myths and their accompanying meanings, and their taboos which were not always comprehensible: the era of genetics would succeed that of genesis.

One hundred and fifty years after the publication of *Frankenstein*, twenty years after the birth of the first baby to be conceived in a test tube, and where are we?

'In a few decades we have learnt to isolate, modify and patent genes, cross over boundaries established millions of years ago between species and kingdoms, transform the living into merchandise, industrial breeding grounds and a genetically modified, even cloned, production line (. . .) Thus the techno-sciences have progressed at high speed and, through an ongoing process of development will perhaps soon allow the abolition of the human race or the creation of better human beings,' writes Louise Vandelac in a recent edition of *Futuribles* (May 2001).

On the subject of *in vitro* fertilization, everything that could be experimented on has been experimented on: division of motherhood, collection of oocytes from non-viable female foetuses, culture of embryos in a womb separate from the body, collection of sperm from dead bodies, and, on a rather less spectacular scale, but one which is just as interesting, acrobatics of filiation of all kinds. The whole process, contained with great difficulty by national legislation and coyly described as 'shifts', constitutes a rather unrealistic picture, of which the main and most significant expression, to my mind, is the attack on filiation which it sets in motion. What flows from this can be understood as the reverse of a non-metaphorical question concerning filiation. As if that process, the reservoir of identifications and fundamental elements of the laws of relationships, was the object which resisted all investigation and could be dismantled just as a child dismantles a toy in order to see how it works. What sort of relationship did we have with our own genealogy to attempt an experiment like this on the genealogical line!

But the main feat of the 1990s was without doubt the birth of Dolly the sheep, setting us face to face with the imminence of human cloning and arousing international turmoil. With cloning, we are removed from the necessary union of gametes, which itself refers to the union of sexual bodies; asexual *in vitro* fertilization had already desexualized our origin, now cloning announced a new advance: birth without parents; a step sideways; the son as the twin of his father. A perfect way to dismantle filiation.

Cloning, seen from the point of view of the unconscious, conjures up a lethal attraction to the double, the Same, and the illusory desire to manufacture man as a reproducible object, who would finally be replicable at will just like scientific objects: an object which does not deny science. The culmination of dedifferentiation. (It is the whole of Western 'reason' which seems pushed into an inability to differentiate, confusion of categories and boundaries between the animate and the inanimate, and between the species.) Technoscience confesses to being exercised by the question of the tyranny of the Other, in the far-reaching movement which leads to cloning and parthenogenesis. 'If cloning is the answer, what was the question?' asked Louise Vandelac in Montreal during a conference in November 2000.

This could be the lesson here from Mary: the danger of epistemophilia does not lie in knowledge, but in the prodigious power of the impulsive energy which supports it, which is likely to convert the otherness on which we are based into object.

The fact that science, the emanation of culture, may now be a threat to culture by carrying right to its very foundations archaic forces which spring from the unconscious is not the least paradox of modernity. The fact is, the question 'Who am I?' is not a frivolous question for the human subject. To obtain, through identification, bearable replies to 'Who am I?' is not a matter of luxury for him, but a question of life and death.

It is also a tirelessly contemporary question. Does the question 'Who am I?' allow a precise answer? This was one of the philosophy questions set for the *baccalauréat* in 2001.

What is there to add to these observations? What is man for man, where are today's great narratives, the distributors, if not of answers, then at least of metaphors and images, and who occupies, and how, the emptiness that is left? I cannot help thinking that epistemophilia, the source of impulse for science, is an infinitely precious thread for thinking about questions such as these. After all, the epistemophilic urge is the only one that civilization does not demand that we give up. It is this urge which today, armed with the tools which modernity has given it, is 'in the process of living a life which has not yet had its last word', according to Lacan at the conference on 'The ethics of psychoanalysis'.

The monstrous which emerges does not imply the creation of real monsters, nor does Mary's lesson imply an exact comparison. This is the paradigm of a more subtle monstrousness; one which, at the apogee of abstraction, the interchangeable, the undifferentiated, and the administrative representation of the living, threatens humanity with the seduction of its objectifying passion. Requests for man-animal patents have been found in the European Patents Office in Munich; but in humans there emerges a rather less visible monstrousness: that which values reification through appropriation and control, or by the loss of the legal status which confers humanity on it, in the order of language and of men. These questions are complex and call for other work, notably by lawyers called upon to reveal that the law is not just a guardian of an otherness which is always acquired and tirelessly re-emerging, but that it is one of a number of discourses which establish, reaffirm and support this otherness.

Before concluding, I should like to say a word about the language in which the necessary legal steps have been taken, and will be taken in the future: is it ill thought out, a defensive reaction when taken by surprise, or an effect of fascination? While for at least twenty years everyone has felt a growing unease at the expansion of the techno-scientific field and the effects of dramatic modification of a common world, many exploits have been celebrated in a language of unbearable ingenuousness, as therapeutic messianism demands. What if IVF experimented with new forms of relationships, putting human rights before the *fait accompli*, imposed silence and anonymity in exchanges, and lied about filiations? Altruism, donation, and the generosity of the donors were blandly celebrated. What if a grandmother gave birth to her daughter's children? The media sang the praises of scientific exploit and maternal love. What if cloned embryos are said to have been used as spare tissue? Lionel Jospin, by means of a conjuring trick which left the members of the National Consultative Committee on Ethics (CCNE) dumbfounded, made the term 'therapeutic cloning' disappear and promised instead 'cells of hope'. In short, the media and all the institutions from the Senate to the Academy of Medicine started to talk in these words, in this *new language* which was born in the laboratories and managed to impose itself on everybody, for want of anything better. It is this language of rationalization that the very people who were given the task of developing the events, which were thus deprived of both attempts at interpretation and an effort of collective understanding, used for their deliberations.

I will give you a few examples. The following can be found in a recent recommendation from the CCNE concerning the extremely sensitive question of therapeutic cloning:

The CCNE notes that the abandonment of the parental project together with the absence of donations inevitably led to these embryos not being able to develop, with the result that, at term, they either died or were destroyed. In this situation, allowing them to be included in a research project with a therapeutic aim according to methods laid down by the text could constitute a demonstration of virtual solidarity between the parents, a life that was not called into existence and the people who could benefit from the research thus carried out.

Virtual solidarity of frozen embryos? Huxley had foreseen that too: it is in effect the 'Greater Being' which is celebrated in *Brave New World*, the mask of confusion, in the same way as the Service of the 'Twelve-in-One'.

In a few months time, if nothing occurs to stop the course of events, it will be possible to sterilize the mentally handicapped, introduce euthanasia in exceptional cases; post mortem *in vitro* fertilization will be legal, and so will therapeutic cloning, which will lose this name in order to be more easily accepted. In all likelihood we will have the right to an Agency of Procreation, Embryology and Human Genetics which will have as its aim the drawing up of legal norms for the species. A clause in the Civil Code will stipulate 'that any intervention intended to bring about the birth of a baby or allow a human embryo to develop from the time of differentiation of tissue not directly resulting from the gametes of a man and a woman, is forbidden'. These are the measures proposed by the French government in spring 2001 as interpreted by various institutions for the revision of the so-called bio-ethical laws.

This is the stage we are at. It is not obscurantism which brings together those who reflect on dehumanization; it is a desire to understand why scientific rationality seems to want to swallow up all the other kinds of rationality; it is an attempt to name what science is about, and what is not science, to approach this absolutism of the rational, which seizes humans right and wants to make them submit, and perhaps renounce any idea of human rights: it is to move towards this breakthrough by means of a terrible paranoid reasoning which might have as its aim the reduction of all otherness in order to make it extremely easily assimilable. There is nothing in this of fate, except tendencies and symptoms, called to unpredictable transformations, and closely linked to the fight from time immemorial against illness, distress and death.

Could Frankenstein be the myth to end all myths, could he give us the narrative to end all narratives, announcing and denouncing at the same time the substitution of transparency for shadow, artifice for fiction, fact for metaphor, science for myth as the end of the humanity of man? Why does scientific reason seem to be evolving with such an end in mind: that is what will be one of the central questions of the future.

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Translated from the French by Rosemary Dear