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Monstrous Contemplation: *Frankenstein*, Agamben, and the Politics of Life

In his recent book *L'uso dei corpi* (The Use of Bodies), Giorgio Agamben offers a complex philosophical genealogy for his central concept of *inoperosità*.¹ Following in the footsteps of previous theoretical efforts spanning his multi-volume project *Homo Sacer*, Agamben's notion is placed in relation to another concept, 'use', which he identifies as the point of departure for an alternative lineage in the political thought of modernity, one which would revoke the latter's hegemonic emphasis and reliance on biopolitics, especially its singling out of 'bare life' as the negative, exceptional foundation on which normal political life is premised in our era.

Agamben excavates the Greek origins of the concept of use, tracing it to the domestic-economic sphere (to the *oikos*) rather than to the public/political domain of the *polis* which has henceforth governed the imaginary of the moderns. The realm of use (or *chresis*) is defined in opposition to that of work and production, that is, in opposition to that realm inhabited by both the artisan and the modern worker (but also, to that of *praxis*, to that of public action or politics). Use is characteristically associated with the figure of the classical slave, insofar as the latter, strictly, does not produce anything, but rather limits himself and his actions to the use of the body. The use of the slave's body calls into question the functional, as well as the spatial and ontological, boundaries around which the definition of the proper *ergon*, of the proper function or 'work' of man, is organised. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle had explained that the *ergon* of man is, according to Agamben's rendition, 'the being-in-work of the soul according to the logos' (*ergon anthropou psyches energeia kata logon*).² And yet, at the same time, Aristotle acknowledges an alternative foundation to the

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *L'uso dei corpi* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2014). *Inoperosità* will be translated here as 'inoperativeness'.

² Agamben, *ibid.*, 23. All translations from the text are mine.

nature of man (for, as Agamben points out, he never questions the humanity of the slave), a different *ergon* which does not concern the *energeia* (that is, the actualisation, the being-in-work, the being-in-act) of the soul according to the guiding principle of reason, but rather, a more immanent and diffuse function, which he describes as *somatos chresis*, or, use of the body.

As Agamben observes, the distinction between *energeia* and *chresis* was gradually established by Aristotle until it came to express an internal caesura, a basic functional divide within the natural constitution of the human. On the one hand, the linkage between man and work consecrated in the sphere of *poiesis* is governed by the thinking of humanity's natural vocation as a necessary passage into actuality, as an adequation to external ends or goals (an adequation that generates, that produces something). On the other, in a realm of functionality that modernity later suppressed, use points to the possibility of a specifically human function that would generate no product, an operation that would neither objectify nor subjectify, but rather inhabit a space of indistinction in which 'to use', which is also and simultaneously, in the context of Classical Antiquity, 'to be used',³ would mean to suspend the actualisation of an action (to avoid producing the *ergon* of man as work). It is in this sense that the slave (and the 'form' of humanity of which he partakes), in his avoidance of *energeia* through a use of the body that is neither strictly active nor passive, can be described as *argos*, that is, as without-work, without *ergon* in the sense dictated by functionality according to external ends.

In contradistinction to the always external, the always outwardly-oriented activity carried out by the worker or the artisan (the activity by which these are effectively defined), the order of action and being to which the classical slave pertains is that of the *ktēma*, of the tool or furniture that make up the home, and which is by definition removed

³ Agamben, *ibid.*, 35.

from the logic of external ends. The slave's use of the body marks a zone of indifferentiation that neutralises the hierarchical position accorded to work in modernity and its emphatic reliance on a clear-cut differentiation between subject and object, self and other.

The conceptual possibilities offered by the classical framework of slavery, and its opening onto a notion of bodily use that may eschew the divisive mechanisms rehearsed by modernity, constitute the point of departure for Agamben's development of his 'utopian' alternative around the notion of *inoperosità* (which, in *L'uso dei corpi*, attains its fullest expression to date). I would like to suggest that this philosophical argument and its central points of reference (use, inoperativeness, bare life, form-of-life) can both greatly illuminate and be illuminated by one of the outstanding landmarks of modern fiction and political allegory, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. It is not only, as we will see, that this classic Gothic novel offers a concise and greatly suggestive illustration of the central division affecting the concept of life in modernity (and thus, of the basic operation through which the 'normalised state of exception' of modern politics could be adumbrated),⁴ but also that it fully engages the ideational possibilities of a radical recalibration of the concept of life, by way of which a genuinely resistant politics may be conceived, even under those same modern pressures.

The gradual privileging, since Classical Antiquity, of *energeia* over that alternative functionality of human nature indicated by the use of the body (and paradigmatically represented by the figure of the slave) can be said to have effectively reached a climax in Mary Shelley's time. As it has been amply demonstrated by several generations of critics, the discoveries surrounding electricity took a firm hold of the Romantic imagination, often leading to suggestive cross-fertilisations between science and politics in

⁴ Agamben's central thesis in the *Homo Sacer* project is indeed that the 'state of exception', as theorised by Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin, has become the norm of modern politics.

their cultural productions.⁵ It is well known that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century experiments and ideas of such diverse figures – ranging from the genuinely pioneering to the outrageously eccentric – as Joseph Priestley, Humphrey Davy, Luigi Galvani, and Giovanni Aldini, among others, drew the attention, and greatly stimulated the imaginative powers, of the group around the Shelleys. Thus, the famous gathering at Byron's Villa Diodati on the shores of Lake Geneva in the summer of 1816, during which the ghost story writing contest that would eventually give rise to *Frankenstein* took place, is known to have featured discussions about galvanism and the possibility of reanimating dead matter.⁶ Whatever the relative merit or demerit accorded to the more speculative visions within the ebullient field of natural philosophy, Shelley's framing of her Gothic tale through an understanding of life qua energetics introduces a series of fundamental tensions that far exceed any narrow focus on the possibilities of modern science as such. What is at stake in this tale of 'modern Prometheanism' is not so much the unnaturalness of the galvanic infusion of life (the theme of artificial, and therefore transgressive, (pro)creation),⁷ as the compulsory twinning, in modernity, between life and the forward motion of incessant actualisation. The symbolic attraction of modern science (and, in particular, of the experimental elucubrations associated with galvanism) resides precisely in the possibility of isolating a principle of life

⁵ See, for example, Peter Vernon, 'Frankenstein: Science and Electricity', *Études Anglaises: Grand-Bretagne, États-Unis*, 50:3 (1997), pp. 270-283; Jane Goodall, 'Electrical Romanticism', in Christa Knellwolf and Jane Goodall (eds.), *Frankenstein's Science: Experimentation and Discovery in Romantic Culture, 1780-1830* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (London: Harper, 2008); Richard C. Sha, 'Volta's Battery, Animal Electricity, and *Frankenstein*', *European Romantic Review*, 23:1 (2012), pp. 21-41.

⁶ An account of this gathering is given in Mary Shelley's introduction to the 1831 edition of the book. See also Holmes, *ibid.*, p. 185.

⁷ This has been one of the principal lines of feminist critical interrogation over the years. See, for example, Anne K. Mellor, 'Possessing Nature: The Female in *Frankenstein*', in Anne K. Mellor (ed.) *Romanticism and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 220-232.

that can be reduced to a pure active movement – to a ‘spark’ marking the passage from one actualised state (dead matter) to another (living matter).

It is in this isolated principle that we will encounter, as Agamben suggests, the key to the separation between being-in-use and being-in-act that will in turn serve as the basis and model for all the other divisions and separations governing modernity. *Frankenstein’s* galvanic imagery suggests a construction of the modern experience in opposition to the pre-emption of compulsory *energeia* or being-in-act associated with the classical slave. It is important to insist that modern understandings of classical slavery presuppose a juridical logic of appropriation and exploitation that is extraneous to the *domestic* context in which it was originally set (as described above), and that is therefore profoundly anachronistic. As we will see below, while invocations of ‘slavery’ abound in *Frankenstein*, these are characteristically derived from the abolition of the regime of use through which a more or less neglected or forgotten philosophical tradition framed its thinking of human nature as *argos*, or, in other words, as independent from external ends or work(s). If *Frankenstein’s* creature *is* a slave, this is only so in the modern sense that allows for a terminological and conceptual fluidity linking the term to other more topical forms of ‘wretchedness’ (from the industrial proletariat to Fanon’s ‘wretched of the Earth’ and beyond).⁸ And yet the tragic kernel of this novel lies in the impossibility of restoring life to use; in the painful confirmation of modernity’s disavowal (and ultimately, suppression) of a form of life immune to *energeia*. In other words, once the ‘galvanic’ principle of actualisation, once the ‘energetic’ secret of life is established, use – i.e. that form of life which could be defined by a non-finalistic orientation, by an effective independence from ends – becomes unthinkable (and modern slavery, or ‘wretchedness’, becomes a figure of boundless exploitation and appropriation/expropriation).

⁸ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001).

I will begin by considering the revocation of use implied by the novel's positing of knowledge as a pervasive (and strictly 'energetic') process. *Frankenstein's* epistolary frame already introduces, before the main narrative concerning its eponymous protagonist commences, a figure of knowledge that can only be understood in overtly energetic terms. Robert Walton, the English explorer who rescues Frankenstein from the frozen wastelands of the Arctic, and to whom the latter will confide his story of Promethean transgression, articulates from the outset a logic of learning that is eminently predicated on the identification and attainment of external ends. For Walton, as for the younger Frankenstein, knowledge is necessarily oriented by its object, by a 'product' (that is also an enthusiastic/energetic drive) that would represent the being-in-act of the intellect. It is in this sense that the letters addressed to his sister insistently rely on a finalistic language, imagining a glorious adventure of discovery whose '*productions* and features may be without example'.⁹ Discovery and production are recurrently entwined and confused in an exclusive concern with the attainment of a goal, with an end that has already pre-emptively captured the intellect, thereby neutralising any unproductive, object-less alternative: 'I feel my heart glow with an enthusiasm which elevates me to heaven, for nothing contributes so much to tranquillize the mind as a steady purpose – a point on which the soul may fix its intellectual eye'.¹⁰ In other words, knowledge is nothing but a process of acquisition leading to a state of satiation/satisfaction.

It is very significant that in these opening letters Walton posits his thirst for discovery/knowledge on the same level as his failed attempt to become a poet: 'I also became a poet and for one year lived in a paradise of my own creation... You are well acquainted with my failure and how heavily I bore the disappointment'.¹¹ For Walton, the being-in-act that

⁹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. J. Paul Hunter (New York: Norton, 2012), 7. My emphasis.

¹⁰ Shelley, *ibid.*, 8.

¹¹ Shelley, *ibid.*, 8.

characterises *poesis*, as well as the ‘romantic’ (sic) enthusiasms that accompany it in this context, necessarily spill over into the broader realm of knowledge, contaminating and reducing it to its finalistic logic.

The latter also features prominently in Victor Frankenstein’s account of his early training. Thus, we read in chapter one that his precocious intellectual appetite was not the product of either convention or coercion, but was rather systematically driven by ‘an end placed in view, which excited us to ardour in the prosecution’ of learning.¹² Science emerges here as the field of knowledge best adapted to this compulsive search for satisfaction, to this energetic release of tension (or actualisation of intellectual potentiality) through the attainment of a desired goal. As Victor points out, in a way that effectively confirms Walton’s unquenchable thirst for discovery: ‘None but those who have experienced them can conceive of the enticements of science. In other studies you go as far as others have gone before you, and there is nothing more to know; but in a scientific pursuit there is continual food for discovery and wonder’.¹³ What makes science so enticing is indeed the promise of the inexhaustibility of its own ends, a perpetual ruling of its specific horizon of actualisation over the faculties (that is, the inactualised, the potential faculties) of the intellect. The experimental vocation of ‘natural philosophy’, and especially its concern with isolable principles and determinable facts, thus pits itself against every form of intransitive or contemplative ‘use’ of the intellect – against every form of ‘study’ in which there is, *objectively*, ‘nothing more to know’.

Agamben has paid close attention to the vexed relationship between actuality and potentiality in Western thought and to the ways in which the latter has often been subordinated to the former. In order to think potentiality in a truly undistorted manner (in

¹² Shelley, *ibid.*, 21.

¹³ Shelley, *ibid.*, 31.

order to think ‘pure potentiality’, that is), Agamben argues that it must be thought primarily as ‘impotentiality’ (what Aristotle calls *adynamia*), that is to say, as ‘the *potentiality not to* (do or be)’¹⁴ that survives in a given habit. Aristotle gives the example of sleep in relation to wakefulness, the former being the ‘im-potential’ state of the latter, or in other words, the ‘habitual’ moment of suspension of actuality (wakefulness).¹⁵

And yet the unveiling of impotentiality, the affirmation of the capacity to refrain from passing over into actuality, that we encounter in habit, implies that this refraining from, for all its ontological truth and conceptual irreducibility, is hierarchically subordinated to actuality as its superior stage. Thus, for Aristotle, wakefulness is nothing but the fulfilled or realised state of the habit of sleep – and hence, its natural end and ruling principle.¹⁶ In the context of Mary Shelley’s novel, it could similarly be argued that the habit of scientific learning embraced by both Walton and Frankenstein postulates its actualisation in discovery and ‘production’ (in the telling sense suggested by Walton’s opening letter), as the superior and therefore governing principle of the intellect.

If, by contrast, habit were to be rethought in relation to use as that specific form of life that cannot be reduced to a process of inevitable actualisation or broken down into a dialectic of means and ends, of subject and object, then a significant measure of autonomy would be restored to the concept of potentiality beyond the aporias of an ambiguously negative figure of impotentiality. For indeed, as we have seen, the ontology suggested by use cannot be resolved or collapsed into any of these polarities (at whose core pulsates the subordination of life to an external *ergon/work*). As Agamben insists, ‘use does not belong to any subject’, it is not something owned or possessed by somebody (as work inevitably is), but

¹⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 45.

¹⁵ Agamben, *L’uso*, 89-90.

¹⁶ Agamben, *ibid.*, 90.

rather, points to a realm of 'being' (to a form of life) that cannot be collapsed into mere 'having'.¹⁷ This means that the force binding potentiality to actuality can only be neutralised if our concept of potentiality does not presuppose a subject that possesses it as an object (which automatically entails a higher stage of being in actuality). It can only be neutralised if habit (say, the intellectual habit, or better – the intellect as habit) is, firstly, thought as use qua non-appropriative procedure, and secondly, if we come to see in 'contemplation' the paradigm of use itself. As Agamben explains, contemplation is that relation which, strictly, has neither subject nor object: on the one hand, s/he who contemplates becomes fully absorbed and lost in the very process of contemplating, and on the other, what is contemplated (in a given work, in a given production) is nothing but potentiality itself (the potentiality to create).¹⁸

The figure of contemplation (and by extension, the figure of use/habit) that emerges here offers a radical antithesis to the finalism or the transitivity of knowledge embraced by Frankenstein and Walton – indeed to a concept of knowledge in which subject and object appear as irreducible in themselves and in their relation to one another. Agamben's notion of contemplation suggests a reorientation or a rearticulation of life beyond the finalism epitomised by knowledge, and thus beyond the subordination of the intellect to the compulsory presence of – as Victor puts it – 'an end placed in view'.¹⁹

In this sense, contemplation supposes the uncovering of a zone of non-knowledge which is not, as Agamben says, some 'mystical fog', but rather, a 'habitual dwelling' in which life takes place *before* (and against) all subjectivation.²⁰ In this sense, use is 'the articulation of a zone of non-knowledge'.²¹ This does not mean that use (or, as

¹⁷ Agamben, *ibid.*, 92.

¹⁸ Agamben, *ibid.*, 93-94.

¹⁹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 21.

²⁰ Agamben, *L'uso*, 94.

²¹ Agamben, *ibid.*, 95.

Agamben says in these passages, *l'uso di sé*, 'the use of self') is in any way an inert relation; on the contrary, it indicates the point at which each and every work, each and every actuality or *energeia*, becomes deactivated and dis-appropriated. For to use/to be used – in the manner of the Greek slave – is indeed to live without property (either subjective or objective): *vivere sine proprio*.²²

The conceptual continuum habit-use-contemplation on which Agamben bases his analysis of inoperativeness can offer not only a critical counterpoint to the 'energetic' dynamics rehearsed in *Frankenstein*, but also a general grid through which to analyse the tensions between the productivist and 'galvanic' logic animating the different characters in their pursuit of knowledge, and what comes across as the irrepressible temptation of suspending or deactivating these hegemonic impulses. In what follows, I will pay particular attention to two general forms in which the alternative regime of use and contemplation threatens to subvert the established hierarchy of *energeia* and knowledge. The first one could be regarded as a pervasive context or backdrop against which the active drama of the narrative is set: this is the landscape, the natural element which frames and systematically intrudes, in all its inoperativeness and impersonality, upon the stormy relations between subjects and their objects of cognition and power. The second one concerns the attempted (and dramatically failed) exertions of the creature to shed the compulsory cycle of creation/destruction and potentiality/actuality of which he is the primary victim, and to pioneer instead a form of life that would disavow and dismantle this forcible duality.

It could be argued that, in *Frankenstein*, the landscape appears as a contextual defence against the excesses, both human and natural, of a form of being dominated by *energeia*. In order to make this claim, it would first be necessary to make a distinction between those constructions of nature and human behaviour customarily included within the

²² Agamben, *ibid.*, 95.

Romantic category of ‘the sublime’ (and on which Shelley seems to draw quite heavily at various points in the novel) and those figurations of a natural setting which, without necessarily inspiring awe or unleashing the transcendental processes of reason,²³ offer a moment of neutralisation or deactivation of this dominant ontology. While those forms or manifestations of nature described as sublime are ultimately reducible to an energetic principle, to an isolable (if vast and seemingly uncontrollable) instance of actualisation, the mode of being embodied in the landscape eludes – as we will see – every form of objectivation/subjectivation. It is not surprising that Frankenstein’s scientific curiosity is first awakened by a thunderstorm or, more specifically, by his witnessing the effects of lightning upon a tree: ‘The catastrophe of this tree excited my extreme astonishment; and I eagerly inquired of my father the nature and origin of thunder and lightning. He replied, “Electricity;” describing at the same time the various effects of that power...’.²⁴ This precisely sublime natural event appears as reducible to a concrete ‘nature and origin’, to an isolable and quantifiable object of knowledge capable of setting the subjective ontology of reason, with its obligatory system of potentiality and actuality, in motion.

Electricity, with its literal link to *energeia*, establishes the principle and the rule through which life (that is, authorised, powerful life) is to be judged in this universe. Or rather, life is reduced to a principle, to a separable object upon which the transcendence of the (knowing, scientific) subject is predicated. Thus, the rule of determinable, knowable ends and principles is strictly homologous to those figures of nature that, while sublime and hence seemingly exceeding the limits of rational understanding, in fact incite and drive the latter’s actualisation

²³ For a wide-ranging account focusing on the two main intellectual sources for the Romantic concept of the sublime, Burke and Kant, see Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: The Romantic Aesthetics of Individuation* (London: Routledge, 1992). For a reading of the concept in relation to the Gothic tradition, including *Frankenstein*, see Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994). See also Nancy Fredricks, ‘On the Sublime and Beautiful in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*’, *Essays in Literature*, 23:2 (1996), pp. 178-189.

²⁴ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 24.

through and *in* work: ‘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’.²⁵ Prompted by the supra-rational vision of sublime nature, Frankenstein effectively inherits and adapts this sublimity to his own ends, positing it as the very foundation of his existence. The sublime is thus not that which necessarily paralyses the transformation of the human potentiality to create and produce rationally into concrete work, but rather emerges as the supreme form of encouragement, as that which subordinates life as a whole to ‘toil’ and ‘labour’ that can be ‘consummated’. The entire process of creation of the monster can then be subsumed within this sublime principle that consequently finds its natural setting, its natural home, not in the open landscape, but rather, in Frankenstein’s closed spaces – the charnel houses that provide him with raw materials and the ‘workshop of filthy creation’ where the labour of *energeia* can be effectively consummated:

I collected bones from charnel houses; and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame. In a solitary chamber, or rather cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a gallery and staircase, I kept my workshop of filthy creation.²⁶

By contrast, landscapes represent in the novel the collapse of this creative drive, the depletion of that ‘eagerness’ which, enclosed within the Gothic vaults of monomaniacal intensity, ‘perpetually increased’ until it brought ‘work near to a conclusion’.²⁷ The landscape is, in other words, what the end-driven subject cannot *see*, since it eludes objectification, since it escapes the capture of *energeia* and hence the ontological system within which he has been trained to operate: ‘It was a most beautiful season; never did the fields bestow a more

²⁵ Shelley, *ibid.*, 32

²⁶ Shelley, *ibid.*, 34.

²⁷ Shelley, *ibid.*, 34.

plentiful harvest, or the vines yield a more luxuriant vintage: but my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature'.²⁸

In a reading of Heidegger, Agamben has pointed out that the human 'world' represents an opening beyond the opaque 'environment' of the animal. In effect, the animal is characterised by its inability to see the difference between openness and closure, which puts it in a state of 'captivation' and 'non-disconcealment'.²⁹ By contrast, humanity, and the world it builds, commence with the recognition of this boundary between the open and the closed, and proceed through the 'deactivation' of the elements that make it imperceptible to the animal. And yet, as we have seen, closure – in the sense of a world whose perimeter and scope are fully determined by a process of appropriation, by a subjective orientation towards a goal – can effectively appear as the fundamental premise of human ontology. The search for the open, which is also, in Agamben's theoretical context, the search for an inoperative/workless regime of use that would overcome the compulsory attraction towards *energeia*, will thus require the deactivation, not only of the animal's environment, but also of the human world and its more or less faithful compliance with closure. The concept of landscape suggests this possible opening beyond both world and environment: 'Being, *en état de paysage*, is suspended and rendered inoperative/workless (*inoperoso*) and the world, which has now become thoroughly inappropriable, goes – so to speak – beyond being and nothingness. No longer animal or human, s/he who contemplates the landscape is only landscape'.³⁰

Thus, the landscape – the emergence of landscape beyond both environment and world – announces the ontological neutralisation of the Aristotelian apparatus of potentiality and actuality, releasing the former from its capture by the latter. Conversely (and this is the way in

²⁸ Shelley, *ibid.*, 34.

²⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 57-62.

³⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *L'uso*, 127.

which the inoperative, deactivating role of the landscape acquires prominence in this novel), the inability to ‘see’ the landscape, the elusive and impenetrable quality that surrounds it in the eyes of Frankenstein, attests to this human world’s state of capture and division, to its brutal subordination of life to work and *energeia*. Whenever the landscape returns to the sphere of Victor’s experience, it is alternately perceived as a therapeutic measure, alleviating his ‘painful state of mind’ through a momentary attempt at contemplation, or more decidedly, as a state of ‘dead calmness’ and ‘inaction’:

I remained two days at Lausanne, in this painful state of mind. I *contemplated* the lake: the waters were placid; all around was calm, and the snowy mountains, ‘the palaces of nature’, were not changed. By degrees the calm and heavenly scene restored me, and I continued my journey towards Geneva.³¹

Nothing is more painful to the human mind, than, after the feelings have been worked up by a quick succession of events, the dead calmness of inaction and certainty which follows, and deprives the soul both of hope and fear.³²

The transition from the first to the second passage underlines Victor Frankenstein’s inability to extricate himself from the rule of action, and from the sovereign schism that he helps enact and sustain even after becoming so dramatically disillusioned with science and its energetic imperative. It is essential to note that, despite his avowed determination to break this fatal bond, Frankenstein remains, throughout the novel, a creature of *energeia* who cannot help reducing contemplation (that is to say, use and inoperativeness) to a figure of death – ‘the dead calmness of inaction’. His entire life is consecrated to the work of actualisation, to the fixation of whichever state of potentiality in a given product, fact, or practice – be it oriented

³¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 48-49. My emphasis.

³² Shelley, *ibid.*, 61.

towards the creation of life, or, faced with the ‘monstrosity’ of the latter, its destruction. As he keeps confessing to Walton: ‘I had begun life with benevolent intentions, and thirsted for the moment when I should *put them in practice*, and make myself useful to my fellow-beings’.³³

If we now turn to consider the monstrous nature of the creature in light of Frankenstein’s (and his human world’s) subordination to this logic, we will soon come to the conclusion that it rests on two aspects: first, on its spontaneous or ‘natural’ deactivation of the schisms and divisions of modern life (beyond its obsessive faith in finalism and productivism), and second, on the possibilities for an inoperative ‘use of the body’ (in the sense suggested above) that this might entail. But before fully engaging with this double quality of the creature’s monstrosity, it is necessary to add one further element to the characterisation of ‘life’ proposed by Frankenstein.

As Agamben has explained, modern politics is notoriously founded upon a divisive intervention in the terrain of life. In Western culture, life has never been an exclusively natural-biological concept, but has always implied, on the contrary, a political-philosophical dimension.³⁴ Or rather, we could say that the concept of natural life that lies at the root of Western thought has systematically implied an operation of internal division. Thus, ever since Aristotle, there has been a clear line of demarcation between natural and politically qualified life, between *zoe* and *bios*. If the former appears as an organic generality (to which the family – including the relationship between master and slave – and the ethnic community, for example, are ascribed) without any claim to ‘perfection’ or ‘happiness’, the latter results from the attainment of a specific equilibrium, a specific harmony which Aristotle refers to as ‘autarchy’ (*autarchia*).³⁵ As Agamben points out, this term refers in principle to a quality of numerical consistency: an autarchic community is that community which exists in the right

³³ Shelley, *ibid.*, 61. My emphasis.

³⁴ Agamben, *L’uso*, 249.

³⁵ Agamben, *ibid.*, 251-252.

number. But in Aristotle's *Politics*, and in the broader context to which the latter has given rise, the concept of autarchy acquires a more general sense, and can be effectively defined as that quality which allows the passage from a mere community of organic life (*koinonia zoes*), such as the family, to a strictly political one. What this implies, in turn, is that life undergoes a dual political operation of selection and exclusion – of qualification and disqualification. Thus, in order for life to be deemed autarchic, and therefore 'happy' or 'perfect' in a socio-political sense, the organic generality of *zoe* upon which the qualification is operated must also produce a non-autarchic residue, an excluded dimension that will eventually constitute the negative foundation of the political community. This 'residue' – which Agamben has famously described as 'bare life' – is thus predicated on the divisibility that life acquires in the context of Western politics.

To put it another way, the political in Western culture is essentially nothing but the subjection of *zoe*, of unqualified organic or biological life, to 'a series of partitions',³⁶ to a general caesura that creates politically qualified life. And yet the dual concept of life that results from this politicisation, from this division operated within the body of *zoe* (politically qualified, or 'autarchic' life, on the one hand, and non-autarchic, bare life, on the other), has 'no other content than the pure fact of the caesura as such'.³⁷ This means, in other words, that the concept of life will only be fully accessible once the 'the biopolitical machine' that enforces the division is finally deactivated.³⁸ Agamben refers to this post-biopolitical concept as 'form-of-life' and defines it as life that cannot be separated from its form. In the context of his philosophical reflection, this alludes to a figure of human life in which none of its elements (single modes, acts and processes) can be reduced to mere 'facts', but always

³⁶ Agamben, *ibid.*, 259.

³⁷ Agamben, *ibid.*, 259.

³⁸ Agamben, *ibid.*, 259.

remain, rather, ‘first and foremost, *possibilities* of life, first and foremost, potentiality’.³⁹ But this is a potentiality, as we have seen, that is eminently *habitual*, experienced as *use*, and which therefore cannot be subordinated to, or fully separated from, actuality. In other words, actuality and potentiality cannot be solidified into separate and hierarchically linked blocks, but must be mobilised as part of a process that annuls the pre-eminence of actuality, that cancels the power of *energeia*, and restores the autonomy of potentiality. The name for this process is, as Agamben points out, *thought*:

We call *thought* the nexus that constitutes forms of life into an inseparable context, into form-of-life. By this [thought], we do not mean the individual exercise of an organ or psychic faculty, but an experience, an *experimentum* whose object is the potential character of human life and intelligence. To think does not simply mean to be affected by this or that thing, by this or that content of thought in act, but to be, at the same time, affected by one’s own receptivity, to experience, in every thought, a pure potentiality of thinking.⁴⁰

Only if thought is reconceptualised as a non-actualised process, as something that is not always already reduced to facts (to ‘thoughts’, as quantifiable objects), but is rather conserved in and through its capacity for non-actualisation, will it appear as true thought. With this concept of thought, we find ourselves back in the realm of contemplation as that most paradigmatic form of use that pre-empts the dissolution of being in its immediate passage to work(s). In this context, it becomes apparent that the contemplative life of thought is nothing but life that has not been subjected to the divisions and partitions that inaugurate modern politics. In contemplation, in thought, life is preserved in its unity, in the dense and now inseparable ‘form’ of possibility and irreducible potentiality.

³⁹ Agamben, *ibid.*, 264.

⁴⁰ Agamben, *ibid.*, 268.

Agamben traces this figure of thinking/contemplative life that cannot be separated from its form to the philosophical writings of Plotinus. According to his analysis, the latter offers an alternative point of departure for the thinking of politics in modernity that does not fall back on the Aristotelian split between *zoe* and *bios*. Thus, rather than predicate politically qualified life on the division that traverses and rends the unqualified body of natural life, what Plotinus understands as political is a certain manner of living the latter, a certain mode of experiencing (or experimenting with) *zoe* that does not presuppose rupture and exclusion, that does not imply positing a negative foundation in the form of eminently separable 'bare life'. The resulting notion of *bios*, is thus 'a mode of life which would be exclusively defined through its special and inseparable union with *zoe*, and which would have no other content than this union'.⁴¹

The monstrous nature of Frankenstein's creature is directly predicated on the tension between these alternative and mutually exclusive conceptualisations of modern political life. I would suggest that what effectively confers the quality of monstrosity upon the creature is the retroactive gesture of division and separation through which the event of life is framed by the energetic and divisive logic embraced by Frankenstein and his culture. In other words, monstrosity signifies that operation whereby the possibility of an inseparable *zoe*, as irreducible process and potentiality, is forcibly inscribed with incompleteness, with lack of form, and hence, with the attributes of bare life. Monstrosity is not a fact internal to the creature's life, since the latter's only content is a pure experiment with the potentiality of living and is hence devoid of facts or attributes (as well as subjectivity). It is, rather, the effect of actions oriented towards the disorganisation of this potentiality, the effect of a complete severing of form from biological existence and the consequent recreation of life as mere *energeia*, as the isolable object of galvanic reanimation.

⁴¹ Agamben, *ibid.*, 279.

We should therefore differentiate between the ‘sublimity’ of the creature’s creation – which on all counts bears the traces of monstrosity, of the monstrous hegemony of actuality over potentiality –, and the contemplative life to which its habitual existence seeks to ascribe itself. The moment of his galvanic ‘birth’ is thus fully distinguishable from those indeterminate moments that make up his early existence, from those initial episodes devoid of a specific content (other than a collection of bodily sensations or affects):

No distinct ideas occupied my mind; all was confused. I felt light, and hunger, and thirst, and darkness; innumerable sounds rung in my ears, and on all sides various scents saluted me: the only object that I could distinguish was the bright moon, and I fixed my eyes on that with pleasure.⁴²

The impersonality of affect has taken here the place of the subject, displacing the latter’s absolute rule of objective ends over its surrounding world. For a brief lapse of time, the creature stands as the embodied cancellation of the rule of purposes and ends, as the promised destitution of the very ontology (and the very ethics) that had in the first place conspired to create him.

It is nevertheless apparent that the capture of *energeia* extends beyond its original province, colonising and engulfing the pure impersonality of sheer embodiment that we encounter in this brief account of the creature’s early life. The autonomy of sensation is thus rapidly displaced by a narrative gesture that infuses the affective raw material with the attributes of knowledge and judgement, and imposes a retroactive frame of external determinations to what can only be, in the material context of a life that is but pure affect and sensation (and hence pure contemplative potentiality), undivided *zoe*, unpoliticised life: ‘I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but, feeling pain

⁴² Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 71.

invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept'.⁴³ What we have here is the sign of a division that only the narrative temporality so closely associated with Walton and Frankenstein (whose acts of narration, whether epistolary or oral, are but supplements to their 'scientific' obsession with the production of work(s)) can sanction; a scission operating on the very fabric of the creature's impersonal life. And as we shall see, the effects of that scission (upon which the biopolitical mechanism of which Agamben speaks is itself predicated) reverberate throughout the rest of the novel. We could even say that the possibility of autarchy (which in this context rests on the socialising gesture of empathy whereby the creature may be accepted by his creator), and consequently of reparation of the onto-ethical fabric of the political community, depends on the stabilisation of the creature's early existence as bare life, on its 'production' as an actualised state of vulnerability and precariousness.

And yet this exercise in ontological pacification is traversed, in the very narrative texture of the creature's account, by contradictory gestures that keep pointing in a different direction. Thus, the crucial phase of his early life in the forest comprises a dual structure with two opposing forces in motion. On the one hand, the creature's existence in this phase is defined by a strictly contemplative attitude, by a non-relationship with the family of French refugees, the De Lacey, based on the protracted avoidance of direct sensory contact. Old De Lacey even functions as the embodiment of this contemplative non-relationship, as a standard of non-energetic, non-actualisable humanity, playing his instrument and providing an affective model for the creature's as yet undivided *zoe*:

The old man, who I soon perceived to be blind, employed his leisure hours on his instrument, or in contemplation. Nothing could exceed the love and respect which the younger cottagers exhibited towards their venerable companion... I spent the winter in this manner. The gentle manners and beauty of the cottagers greatly

⁴³ Shelley, *ibid.*, 70.

endeared them to me: when they were unhappy, I felt depressed; when they rejoiced, I sympathized in their joys.⁴⁴

On the other hand, this non-relationship lays the foundations of the creature's immersion within the finalistic logic of the surrounding human world. For it is indeed throughout this phase of contemplative exposure to an affective relationship that is never subjectified (until the catastrophic moment of his disclosure, which puts an end to it) that the creature becomes inured to the cumulative and outwardly oriented logic of knowledge. There is here a fundamental tension between two exclusive openings onto *zoe*, two contradictory modes of relationality with the world. The first and primary one of impersonal affectivity, a state of life in which the creature is nothing but sheer *use of self* (sheer *landscape*, even); the second one, a teleological search for understanding that soon transmutes into a search for origins and principles. Along with the latter comes a dramatic series of revelations about 'the strange system of human society', providing a harsh and painful backdrop, a fundamental measure and principle of division, to the generic form of life experienced by the creature in the forest:

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, doomed to waste his powers for the profit of the chosen few. And what was I? Of my creation and creator I was absolutely ignorant; but I knew that 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. I was more agile than they, and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded their's. When I looked around, I saw and heard of

⁴⁴ Shelley, *ibid.*, 76-77.

none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?⁴⁵

Learning is thus indissolubly linked, for the creature, to the grasping of class differences and of the mechanisms of division and fragmentation pervading – and constituting – socio-political life. This generic understanding immediately turns to specific and individualised suffering, to a private awareness of the creature's standing in the midst of this divisive operation, and consequently, to a ferocious questioning of his own nature. This moment inaugurates the authorised meaning of monstrosity under which he will be enjoined to act, shedding his previous state of pure affectivity and potentiality. In a gesture that will preside over the rest of his existence, consciousness is twinned with deformity, and thus the material sign of the separability of life (the mark of division splitting *zoe* into bare/exceptional and autarchic life), is accorded a subjective shaft, a destructible, monstrous form.

To be a monster is thus, in this context, simultaneously to endure the internal rending of the generic body of *zoe*, and to sustain the subjective consciousness and knowledge that enable its narrativisation (that is, the transformation of this division of life into a tale, into a 'work' of narration). Under the sign of monstrosity (which is to say, under the sign of knowledge, of consciousness, of *energeia*), the impersonality of affect that had opened life up to a non-finalistic, contemplative use, yields tragically to a desperate abyss of suffering and sorrow: 'sorrow only increased with knowledge. Oh, that I had for ever remained in my native wood, nor known or felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst, and heat!'.⁴⁶ Moreover, knowledge reveals itself as an unshakeable chain, as an overbearing mechanism of capture which, once mobilised, no residual attachment to impersonality can possibly stem:

⁴⁵ Shelley, *ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁶ Shelley, *ibid.*, 83.

Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen on the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling; but I learned that there was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death – a state which I feared yet did not understand.⁴⁷

Only death appears to afford refuge from the brutal process of division and separation of society (of which knowledge is but its intellectual form): only an event of extinction which the creature *learns* to fear and eschew, and thus to replace, fatefully and aporetically, with a series of desperate efforts to conserve his own divided, formless existence.

The more knowledge the creature imbibes, the more the brutal facticity of his bare life becomes apparent, and consequently, the more the sovereign relation to his creator is secured as the only biopolitical horizon. Thus Milton's Satan provides him with a model of exclusion, with an archetype of deformity through which the broader, social deformity of division and separation (the very separation of life from its form that defines bare life), is echoed and amplified.⁴⁸ In such literary analogies, knowledge rehearses the exceptionality with which life is dressed up in the biopolitical, rendering the compulsory doctrine of *energeia* as a normalisation of the state of exception.⁴⁹

With the possibility of restoring life to its contemplative state of inactuality, to that 'form' of habitual potentiality, of affective impersonality, which the creature's early moments in the forest retrospectively afford, gone, all that remains is the disfigured image of a human world dominated by the dialectic of creation/destruction. The novel resolves itself in a quick succession of manic gestures alternating from one pole to the other: from the creature's imploring – and then commanding – that Frankenstein create a female companion

⁴⁷ Shelley, *ibid.*, 83-84.

⁴⁸ Shelley, *ibid.*, 90-91.

⁴⁹ It should be remembered that Agamben's biopolitical primal scene, the camp, is strictly defined as the point at which the state of exception (or *ex-ceptio*, that scenario of internalisation or capture of the excluded, bare life) becomes the norm.

of equally monstrous and wretched qualities, and the latter's initial acceptance of this request, to his subsequent refusal and destruction of the inert body in the making. The *energeia* of production thus giving way, in a fatal loop, to the *energeia* of sovereign abolition – that is, to death understood as the culmination (as the only possible consummation) of the process that had displaced the regime of use.

When the creature desperately invokes the figure of slavery that will preside over this final sequence of events (from the murders of Frankenstein's friend Clerval and bride Elizabeth, to the closing standoff on the North Pole),⁵⁰ what is being effectively invoked is the cancellation of that alternative thinking about human nature (which Agamben finds along the byroads of Classical Antiquity) as *argos* or without-work. In other words, the subsumption of the figure of the slave within one of sovereign exclusion and separation acting upon the body of life, making it irrecoverable for potentiality, for contemplation, for use, points to an ineluctable subordination to *energeia*. The only resistant answer to the sublimity of Frankenstein's transgression, and to the generalised *passage à l'acte* of this universe, lies in the registering of an alternative use of the body, of a figure – pushed to the narrative margins, but retrospectively legitimised by its promise of ontological deactivation – of contemplative life *before* and *beyond* work.

⁵⁰ 'Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension...', Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 120.

