Alessandra Squeo

Hybridizing Textual Bodies and Neo-Gothic Identities: Frankenstein's Afterlife in Shelley Jackson's Fiction

Abstract: Against the background of the current scholarly debate on the Neo-Gothic fascination with the body manipulation and dissection, this paper examines some recent transmutations of the archetype of the hybrid monster of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. More specifically, the paper focuses on Shelley Jackson's production, from the hypertexts *Patchwork Girl, or A Modern Monster* (1995) and *My Body. A Wunderkammer* (1997) to *The Melancholy of Anatomy* (2002), up to her most recent project *Skin* (2010). Although she cannot be strictly considered part of the Neo-Gothic stream, her works exemplify significant ways in which post human thought intersects with Gothic textuality. By reimagining Frankenstein's archetype of the assembled creature, Jackson explores emerging postmodern paradigms of disturbingly porous and disjointed identities in the context of digital culture.

Keywords: Neo-Gothic; Shelley Jackson; Frankenstein; Hybrid Body; Postmodern Identity; Digital Media; Hypertext.

Alessandra Squeo
University of Bari "Aldo Moro", Italy
alessandra.squeo@uniba.it

Largely founded upon ambivalence, the definition of Gothic has long been a thorny issue allowing more than a single, straightforward approach. As Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy have pointed out, the gothic has been differently classified by scholars according to its "emphasis on the returning past (Baldick 1992, Mighall 1999), its dual interest in transgression and decay (McGrath 1997), its commitment to exploring the aesthetics of fear (Punter 1980) and its cross-contamination of reality and fantasy (Jackson 1981)."[1] Still more elusive is the category of Neo-Gothic, whose poetics, cultural roots and relationships with literary movements, genres and media have acquired increasing prominence in the cultural debate of the last few years. Catherine Spooner has more recently clarified:

> What distinguishes contemporary Gothic, the Gothic texts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, is on the whole not a sense

of impending apocalypse, but rather three quite independent factors. Contemporary Gothic possesses a new self-consciousness about its own nature; it has reached new levels of mass production, distribution and audience awareness, enabled by global consumer culture; and it has crossed disciplinary boundaries to be absorbed into all forms of media.[2]

Moving far beyond the mere reiteration of the late 18th and early 19th tradition, the assorted expressions of the Neo-Gothic production primarily testify to the "ability of the Gothic mode to adapt and remold itself into various situations, narratives, forms and media"[3], from graphic novels and comics to films and animations. Spooner has gone so far has to argue that, "in contemporary Western culture, the Gothic lurks in all sorts of unexpected corners. Like a malevolent virus, Gothic narratives have escaped the confines of literature and spread across disciplinary boundaries to infect all kinds of media, from fashion and advertising to the way contemporary events are constructed in mass culture."[4]

In the light of the ongoing scholarly debate, this essay investigates the legacy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818), a text that on the occasion of its bicentennial can claim the status of a myth profoundly resonant in contemporary literature and culture.[5] As Jay Clayton has put it, "Frankenstein has had an illustrious career; virtually every catastrophe of the last two centuries – revolution, rampant industrialism, epidemics, famines, World War I, Nazism, nuclear holocaust, clones, replicants, and robots

– has been symbolized by Shelley's monster."[6] Such resonance acquires particular relevance within the specific background of neo-gothic literature, where the human body epitomizes "one of the sites of haunting", as David Punter has recently argued:

The body can be changed, it can be subjected to all manner of prosthesis, extension, invasion, and it may well be that in the end, as various lines of argument have it, we are all in the act of becoming cyborgs; but while that transformation is incomplete, we still have to confront the fruits – and indeed the by-products of our labour, creatures which are not fully created, humans who suspect that they are not fully human, monsters who are even capable of entertaining doubts to their own monstrosity; and it seems as though, while are engaging in that confrontation, that process of endless flight and pursuit, the figures of Victor Frankenstein and his creature will remain and continue to develop in our imagination.[7]

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is unquestionably, as Ian Conrich and Laura Sedgwich have pointed out, a commanding progenitor of the neo-Gothic body, whose different parts have become the focus of horror, testifying to the fact that "the body previously dissected for anatomical explorations continues to engage and engross within popular culture of modern mutilation, and that once collapsed into its parts, is highly revealing of the impact of Gothic fiction."[8]

This topic finds some of its most intriguing expressions in the cross-genre

and cross-media production of the American writer Shelley Jackson who imaginatively explores the far reaching metaphorical implications of the archetype of the assembled creature in Mary Shelley's novel. While certainly epitomizing the neo-gothic concern for otherness, alienation and disjointed identities that mostly haunt postmodernity, Jackson's work also provides, as I will argue, an inventive investigation of the deep similarities between the 'hideous body' brought to life by collecting fragments and the 'hybrid' configuration of new digital textual forms, whose labyrinthine and branching spaces entail "an impression of fragmentariness which lends itself to Gothic narratives of monstrous creation."[9]

Patchwork Girl, or a Modern Monster[10]– 'a brilliant hypertext parable of writing and identity'[11], as George Landow has defined it – may be regarded as a meta-hypertext, offering insights into the many parallels between new digital writing spaces and the redefinition of the self in postmodern culture. As the title suggests, it is an inventive rewriting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, while also weaving together several other intertextual references ranging from Frank Baum's *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* (1913) and Larry Niven's *The Patchwork Girl* (1980) to Eric Red's horror thriller film *Body Parts* (1991).

"Though it is not necessary to read *Frankenstein* in order to read *Patchwork Girl*", the author admits, "Mary Shelley's work may enrich mine'"(Sources). The protagonist is indeed the female mate that the unnamed monster vainly asks Victor Frankenstein to create in one of the most dramatic pages of the nineteenth century novel:

You must create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for may being. This you alone can do; and I demand of you as a right you must not refuse to concede" [...] "I do refuse" I replied; "and no torture shall ever extort a consent form me. You may render me the most miserable of men, but you shall never make me base in my own eyes. Shall I create another like yourself, whose joint wickedness might desolate the world? Begone! I have answered you; you may torture me, but I will never consent.[12]

Shelley Jackson imagines that this female monster is secretly brought to life by Mary Shelley herself, whose motherly care can assure her a better destiny. "In the world Shelley knew, there could be no happy monsters. But only because of bad dad", the author explains, "A motherless monster with a shiftless dad runs amok, but what about a monster with a loving mother? I took up that inquiry, but – the Frankenstein monster having brought his tragic trajectory to a fiery end – I was more curious about Mary's second child."[13]

Unlike Victor Frankenstein's growing repugnance towards his creature ("I had worked hard for nearly two years for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body [...] now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart"[14]), a much more complex mixture of abhorrence and attachment characterizes the relationship between Mary and her own monster. It is a dichotomy that epitomizes the neo-gothic coexistence of opposite feelings as well as the typical intersection "between

attraction and repulsion" in the experience of horror.[15] Such a physical attraction acquires even a sexual connotation:

> Last night I lay in her arms, my monster, and for the first time laid my hand on her skin. Her skins, I should rather say, or forgo the possessive altogether. Others had as good a right as she-perhaps better-to call that skin their own. […] I touched her skin lightly, and yet she trembled, as if my fingers burned her. (Journal, I lay)

Through what Genette would define a metaleptic violation of thresholds of representation, Jackson's work merges diegetic and extradiegetic levels, undermining the "separation between the fictional world and the ontological world occupied by the author" in line with postmodern poetics.[16] This is only the first of the several transgressions that disturbingly join and hybridize different ontological levels, textual spaces, genres and forms involving the reader in an intricate narrative construction that imaginatively recasts the Chinese-box system of interconnected narratives that weaves together the voices of Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein and of the unnamed monster in the 19th century novel. The fortuitous coincidence of Mary Shelley's name with her own offers Shelley Jackson the occasion to explore the blurring identities of author, creator and character, as the pun in the title page suggests: '*Patchwork Girl, or a Modern Monster* by Mary/Shelley and herself'. As Katherine Hayles has noticed:

> […] the slash in M/S (ironically interjected into the MS which would signify the 'original' material text in

normal editorial notation) may also be read as signifying the computer interface connecting/dividing Mary Shelley, a character in Patchwork Girl, with Shelley Jackson, the author who sits at the keyboard typing the words that conflate Mary's sewing and writing and so make 'Shelley' into both character and writer.[17]

As big and bad as her brother, the patchwork girl is a hideous being made by assembling parts of the dead bodies of several women, two men and even a cow:

> I am tall and broad-shouldered enough that many take me for a man; others think me a transsexual (another feat of cut and stitch) and examine my jaw and hands for outsized bones, my throat for the tell-tale Adam's Apple […] I was made as strong as my unfortunate brother, but less neurotic! (Story, I am)

Crossing borders and hybridizing the categories of male/female, human/non human, she embodies the essence of the 'grotesque'. As Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund have pointed out:

> Many early descriptions of monstrous forms take the literal forms of hybrids, mixtures of man and animal: minotaurs have the body of a man and the head of a bull, harpies are birds with the heads of women, Egyptian gods are sometimes portrayed as combining a human body and a bird-head of a cat-head. Such figures foreground the limits of the human body, policing the margins of human classification."[18]

She also largely responds to Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg, a hybrid synthesis of man and machine, which overcomes the dualisms biological/technological, natural/artificial[19] that have for too long informed the stereotype of the Western white male subject:

> Identities seem contradictory, partial and strategic. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, or 'being' monster, or 'being' angel. We find ourselves to be cyborgs, hybrids, mosaics, chimeras" (Body of Text, Chimeras)

Far more relevant, however, is the metaphorical association that Shelley Jackson explores between the disjointed body of the protagonist and her own hypertext, a weird mixture of extremely dissimilar parts, including three narrative sections, *a Journal*, *Story*, *a Graveyard,* and two non-fiction ones, *a Quilt* and *Broken Accents*. The structural complexity that characterizes the gothic as a highly hybrid genre[20] is thus here further developed owing to the great potentialities of the hypertextual form, an inherently fragmented and non-sequential writing, admitting multiple pathways within a given body of text chunks, nodes or *lexias,* to adopt the definition that George Landow borrows from Roland Barthes, and connecting links.

Moving far beyond the metaphor of the tree suggested by Ted Nelson's prominent definition of hypertext – "a text that branches and allows choices to the reader"[21] –, Jackson investigates the imaginative association between the inherently loose and porous nature of hypertextual chunks and a monster's disjointed body, whose scattered anatomic parts appear in different combinations in the graphical interface. As George Landow points out: "Hypertext destroys the notion of a fixed unitary text [...] dissolving intellectual separation of texts as some chemicals destroy the cell membrane of an organism."[22] Jackson goes so far as to argue that 'boundaries of texts are like boundaries of bodies", as "both stand in for the confusing and invisible boundary of the self'.[23]

The opening node of the hypertext, *Her*, eloquently shows the black and white image of the stitched-together protagonist, crossed by dotted lines: 'my patchwork girl emerged out of these more abstract concerns as a metaphor for a fragmented and dispossessed text", clarifies the author, "the stitched-together monster is an easy metaphor for any text, but especially hypertext'.[24] The scars of the creature are thus openly compared to hypertextual links:

> I am like you in most ways. My introductory paragraph comes at the beginning and I have a good head on my shoulders. I have muscle, fat and a skeleton that keeps me from collapsing into suet. But my real skeleton is made of scars: a web that traverses me in three-dimensions. (Journal, Cut)

Both reveal the dispersed nature of the whole, while also holding different fragments together: 'your scars not only mark a cut, they also commemorate a joining' (Journal, Cut). As Erica Seidel explains: "The monster's scars are intimate, integral, the essence of her identity. Similarly, the essence of hypertext is the linking, the private ways that the author chooses to arrange her piece, and the reader uses to meander through it."[25]

Such a discontinuous textual structure entails indeed an active involvement of the reader, who is openly invited to select fragments and temporarily patch them together according to his own criteria of relevance. "Hypertext has no centre", as George Landow points out, "it provides an infinitely recentrable system whose provisional point of focus depends upon the reader [...] anyone who uses hypertext makes his or her own interests the *de facto* organizing principle (or centre) for the investigation at the moment."[26] Like Victor Frankenstein, who assembles pieces of dead bodies in the 19th century novel, the reader of *Patchwork Girl* is thus overtly encouraged to collect and juxtapose text nodes as well as the anatomic parts of the protagonist in the graphical interface, thus producing a verbal patchwork that literally keeps alive the stitched-together monster for the duration of his reading experience: "I am buried here", explains the protagonist: "You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see the whole, you will have to sew me together yourself". As the node 'Headstone' further clarifies: "Here Lies a Head, Trunk, Arms (Right and Left), and Legs (Right and Left) as well as divers Organs appropriately Disposed. May they Rest in Piece". (Graveyard, Headstone)

Moving across a loose and fragmented textual body, the reader intersects therefore the section *Journal* with the scattered fragments of Mary Shelley's imaginary diary, in which her female activities of sewing and quilting are inventively associated to the act of writing:

I had *made* her, writing deep into the night by candlelight, until the tiny

black *letters* blurred into *stitches* and I began to feel that I was *sewing a great quilt*, as the old women in town do night after night. (Journal, Written)
I had *sewn* her, stitching deep into the night by candlelight, until the tiny black *stitches* wavered into *script* and I began to feel that I was *writing*, that this creature I was assembling was a brash attempt to achieve by artificial means the unity of a life-form. (Journal, Sewn)

The text chunks of the section *Story* offer the reader, from another perspective, the monster's own account of her exceptionally long and eventful existence: 'Born full-grown, I have lived in this frame for 175 years' (*Story, I am*). It is a likewise fragmented report of assorted adventures involving cross-dressing and the purchase of a false identity in search of a new life in America, as well as the painful resolution to wander off into the desert of Death Valley, "an effective counterpoint to the fate of Frankenstein's creature, who disappears into the ice floes of the Artic."[27]

Graveyard, perhaps the most remarkable and distinctly morbid of the three narrative sections, gives voice to the different anatomic parts that compose the protagonist, allowing them to tell the stories of the characters they originally belonged to. Therefore, depending on the selected reading path, the narrative focus shifts from Susannah ('My tongue belonged to Susannah, who talked more than she ate, and ate more than the baker and the butcher combined') to Bella ('My stomach belonged to Bella, an oblate simpleton. She was never dyspeptic, though she ate everything'), from Jennifer ('my right leg

belonged to Jennifer, who buried herself in layers of petticoats, flounces and furbelows') to Angela ('My trunk belonged to a dancer, Angela, a woman of low birth but high sights, and a mimic ear for the accents of the upper class'). Through such a 'collage of mini-narratives of Bakhtinian multivocality[28], the reader discovers the stories of Charlotte, who uses her breast milk as invisible ink to write letters to her dead children, and of Jane, a nanny whose tattooed leg is still bearing traces of a lover she has long waited for:

> My left leg belonged to Jane, a nanny who harboured under her durable grey dresses and sensible undergarments a remembrance of a less sensible time: a tattoo of a ship and the legend Come back to me. Nanny knew some stories that astonished her charges, and though the ship on her thigh blurred and grew faint and blue with distance, until it seemed that the currents must have long finished their work, undoing its planks one by one with unfailing patience, she always took her children to the wharf when word came that a ship was docking, and many a sailor greeted her by name. My leg is always twitching, jumping, joggling. It wants to go places. It has had enough of waiting. (Graveyard, Left leg)

The metaphorical association between sewing/quilting and writing is further explored in the non-fiction sections *Crazy Quilt* and *Broken Accents* where the reader is invited to weave together a variety of excerpts from texts as diverse as Derrida's *Disseminations*, Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Frank Baum's *The Patchwork*

Girl of Oz, Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* and even anonymous articles of the magazine *Elle*. As Shelley Jackson explains: "[…] sentences always say more than they mean, so writers always write more than they know […] It was not difficult to pry quotes from their sources and mate them with other quotes in the 'quilt' section of Patchwork Girl, where they take on a meaning that is not native in the originals."[29]

The ever-changing structure of such a hybrid textual body thus entirely depends upon the unpredictable choices of the reader, who is responsible for selecting nodes and temporarily activating links, thus metaphorically transporting blood and oxygen to the cells and organs of the protagonist, as the node *Blood* remarks:

> What happens to the cells I don't visit? I think maybe they harden over time without the blood visitation, enclosures of wrought letters fused together with rust, iron cages like ancient elevators with no functioning parts. Whereas the read words are lubricated and mobile, rub familiarly against one another in the buttery medium of my regard. (Body of Text/ Blood)

The patchwork girl is, on the other hand, perfectly aware of the precarious wholeness of her 175-year-old body, which repeatedly seems on the point of disassembling, producing grotesque situations:

> […] my hand dropped off in a supermarket, where it sounded like a heavy

fruit falling, so the produce person gave me a stern look across the avocados until I picked it up and plopped it in my basket, between the mushrooms and the cabbage (Story, More Partings)

Her inexorably approaching death is vividly foreseen in the scene in which she imagines her body's final disintegration, when the different anatomic parts will come back to their rightful owners, and the textual chunks will return to the original sources:

> [...] the restoration of bodily wholeness for the rest of you will rend me apart. Jennifer, Bronwyn and the rest will sit up from their graves in the little cemetery where I was born and where I will, where I now, where I have many times awaited my 'death', and in front of them all I will come apart paragraph by paragraph. I all quotes remain tethered to their sources by however tenuous filaments, so my parts. My face will explode into fragments: eyeballs roll back to Tituba, teeth fly like sideways hail to the empty gums of Walter and Judith, sorting themselves as they go (molars to Judith, incisors to Walter, who ate only wine biscuits and blancmange). My fingers will heal themselves back onto the stumps of their various donors. (Body of Text/Hidden Figure).

In this perspective, the neo-gothic fascination with dissecting bodies offers Shelley Jackson an imaginative approach to what recent scholarship has identified as the anxiety inextricably linked to the radical transformations brought about by new digital textualities. They present the text, as George Landow has put it, "not as a falsely unitary entity but as a dispersed field of variants."[30] It is a view that largely actualizes Roland Barthes's notion of the 'ideal text' where "the networks interact without anyone of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signified, it has no beginnings, it is reversible, we gain access to it by several entrances none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one."[31]

The disturbingly disjointed monster of *Patchwork Girl* thus becomes the objective correlative of the inherent unsteadiness of electronic writing and of the hypertextual form[32], whose transitory links and multiple reading paths threateningly undermine the reassuring stability of printed books and, in a wider proportion, the print-based notions of 'linearity', 'fixity' and 'demarcation' assumed for centuries as epistemic paradigms of Western thought.[33]

On the other hand, however, the archetype of the 'monstrous creature' also offers a powerful metaphor to address the issue of the fragmented subjectivity in emerging postmodern paradigms of identity, that are a crucial concern of Shelley's entire production. If the 175-year-old monster's body, constantly on the point of falling apart, seems to echo a neo-gothic fascination with death within a cultural background in which the barriers between gothic and horror become increasingly indistinguishable,[34] her disjointed body also exemplifies a new idea of the self entailing notions of permeability and porousness, as Catherine Spooner remarks: "The fascination with freakishness is partly based

in performative notions of identity – remaking the self as monstrous – and partly in an apparently contradictory attempt to reinstate the physicality of the body in an increasingly decorporealized information society."[35]

As the protagonist of *Patchwork Girl* clarifies: "I am made up of a multiplicity of anonymous particles and have no absolute boundaries. I am a swarm' (Body of Text, Self Swarm). What best defines her identity is the 'dotted line' that transverses her anatomic parts: 'The dotted line is the best line […] It is a permeable membrane: some substance necessary to both can pass from one side to the other' (Body of Text, Dotted Line). Such observations bear traces of what Fred Botting envisages as a typical characteristic of contemporary neogothic, where "difference evaporates into the in-difference of simulations; otherness collapses on the same. Boundaries between inside and outside become redundant […] identity and difference, norm and monster become indistinguishable in a proliferation of differentiations and hybrids."[36] The text node *hazy whole* offers, from a scientific perspective, a disturbing remark on the porous nature of our body:

> On the microscopic level, you are all clouds. There is no shrink-wrap preserving you from contamination: your skin is a permeable membrane. Molecules hang in continuity but are nowhere near as locked in a place as a brick wall, and when they get excited, they take flight! (Body of Text, Hazy Whole)

The body is thus increasingly meant as an ongoing process of construction/ deconstruction that finds its most appropriate expression in the gothic genre, "a discursive site, a 'carnivalesque' mode for representations of the fragmented subject" as Robert Miles defines it: "the gothic represents the subject in a state of deracination, of the self finding itself dispossessed in its own house, in a condition of rupture, disjunction, fragmentation […] gothic writing needs to be regarded as a series of contemporaneously understood forms, devices, codes, figurations, for the expression of the fragmented subject.[37]

To put it in Shelley Jackson's terms, the body is "a loose aggregate of entities […] not even experienced as a whole. We never see it all, we can't feel our liver working or messages shuttling through our spine. We patch a phantom body together out of a cacophony of sense impressions, bright and partial views."[38] The same impression of fragmentation and multiplicity that characterizes our mind and memories ("There are many of other you's, each a different combination of memories. These people exist. They are complete, if not exactly present, lying in potential in the buried places in the brain" [Story/She goes on]) also defines the true essence of our body. It displays a frighteningly mixed and ghostly nature, as the author argues, owing to the unpredictable combination of the countless genes we inherit from generations of ancestors:

> Our bodies are haunted as well as our minds. We are haunted by our uncle's nose, our grandfather's cleft palate, our mother's poor vision, our father's baldness. There are ghosts in the form of recessive genes, that never show themselves to us but might appear to

our children, to the seventh son of a seventh son" (Story/Body Ghosts)

Such views are further developed in Shelley Jackson's *My Body. A Wunderkammer* (1997), a curious semi-autobiographical hypertext still bearing on the archetype of *Frankenstein*, and mostly focusing on the relationship between human identity and the body's constituent organs, fluids and connective tissues. Inventively reinterpreting the gothic trope of the disjointed body, and explicitly associating it to a cabinet of curiosities, or a 'wonder-room', as the title suggests, the narrator's naked body is indeed divided into twenty-four sections that correspond to different text chunks. Each link provides a short story about a specific body part, to which particular memories are associated:

> I was proud of my shoulders, moulded by swimming and tennis [...] At school, I felt like a football player. Hulking, muscle bound. For some reasons, almost all my friends very very short, and I loomed over them. I my mind's eye, I was a leering giant, gesticulating and capering around and the little people, making them laugh, just as a Frankenstein monster. My parts didn't match. I couldn't even make them move smoothly together when I thought I was being watched. (Body of Text, Shoulders)

The theme of the dissection of the human body is explored from a different perspective in *The Melancholy of Anatomy* (2002), clearly hinting at Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. "Burton tries to anatomize a spiritual condition" Jackson explains, "He attempts to anatomize an amorphous and spiritual phenomenon, melancholy, at a time when the grasp of science on even concrete phenomena [...] was pretty weak. In *The Melancholy of Anatomy*, I try to do the opposite: spiritualize anatomy."[39] Divided into four sections, corresponding to four different humors (choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic, and sanguine), the work further develops the metaphorical association between the body and the text:

> This kinship between body and text seems to me to work both ways: the book is a kind of body, and the way we feel toward it is a bit like how we feel about people. [...] My book is divided into humours to make it even more like a body, but a body that, like the body in medieval science, is in collusion with texts of all sorts.[40]

Focusing each on a specific bodily element, such as 'Egg', 'Sperm', 'Foetus', 'Cancer', or 'Nerve', the different chapters inspect the human body from the inside out and outside in, focusing with morbid obsession on bodily fluids and humors that are released upon the world: the city of London has therefore a menstrual flow, and "the red dot, smaller than a pinhead", that the protagonist of the opening chapter removes from her eye, becomes an increasingly huge and terrifying egg: "I realized that the egg had grown so big it blocked the light from the window. I could just make its black curve against the ceiling. I was lying against it, almost under it, since, as it grew, it had overshadowed me."[41] The barrier between the inside and the outside of the body becomes dreadfully blurred in

the section 'Cancer': "I knew that in some way I had secreted the cancer, sneezed it from a nostril. It was not from outside"[42], declares the protagonist, who finally decides to break into the huge tangle to fight against it: "The I went to the room the cancer was in, axe in hand [...] I reached in and caught a hank, swung the axe at the taut strands. I stepped inside the cancer, hacking around indiscriminately. The limbs shook only with my own movements."[43]

The association between bodily and textual fragmentation is then taken even further in Jackson's most recent project *Skin*, launched in August 2003. It is an extravagant experiment published exclusively in the form of tattoos on the skin of volunteers, one word each, as the author announces in the call for participants:

> Each participant must agree to have one word of the story tattooed upon his or her body. The text will be published nowhere else, and the author will not permit it to be summarized, quoted, described, set to music, or adapted for film, theater, television or any other medium. The full text will be known only to participants, who may, but need not choose to establish communication with one another.[44]

Skin is therefore a "mortal work of art" existing only in the 'flesh' of the 2095 volunteers all over the world: "As words die the story will change; when the last word dies the story will also have died. The author will make every effort to attend the funerals of her words."[45] The volunteers' reasons for taking part in such a project are manifold, as the author herself explained in an interview, "some say they love

books, some they love tattoos, some that they want to feel like they are an essential part of something larger than themselves, something that ties them to people around the world with an invisible thread. They want to make an extravagant gesture of faith in literature, art, in the imagination in general."[46]

Accepting to 'embody' the scattered words of the only existing manuscript of an unsteady and ultimately mortal text, *Skin* participants become themselves scattered fragments, whose meanings depend on their connection to the whole. To some extent, they exemplify a sort of existential instability that the 1990s cultural debate identified as the essence of an emerging notion of identity, a "Protean Self", to borrow Robert Lifton's definition:

> We are becoming fluid and many-sided. Without quite realizing it, we have been evolving a sense of self appropriate to the restlessness and flux of our time. This mode of being differs radically from that of the past, and enables us to engage in continuous exploration and personal experiment. I have named it the 'protean self,' after Proteus, the Greek sea god of many forms.[47]

More specifically, their condition of relatedness to the other fragments epitomizes Kenneth Gergen's view of the "saturated self", constantly engaged in real, virtual and imagined relations that shape his, attitudes, values, opinions, moralities, thus making him a changing *pastiche* of personalities. It is the condition of the self in the age digital technologies, where new media and computer-mediated communication

play a growingly crucial role in the processes of identity construction. As Gergen clarifies:

> Emerging technologies saturate us with the voices of humankind – both harmonious and alien. As we absorb their varied rhymes and reasons, they become part of us and we of them. Social saturation furnishes us with a multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self. [...] This fragmentation of self conceptions corresponds to a multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships. These relationships pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an 'authentic self' with knowable characteristics recedes from view. The fully saturated self becomes no self at all.[48]

Increasingly meant in terms of 'performance', identity becomes therefore the result of threateningly multiple, blurring and nomadic selves, endlessly constructed and reconstructed in ever-changing forms of online narratives of the self, such as personal websites, blogs or social networks, in a cross-media environment where fragments can be excerpted, recombined and endlessly repurposed in unexpected and intrinsically unstable combinations.

In conclusion, regardless of whether and to what extent Shelley Jackson's production could be rightly included in the Neo-Gothic stream, her works unquestionable testify to the manifold forms in which gothic issues strongly pervade the contemporary scene, disturbingly undermining "boundaries of self, culture and society"[49] as well as notions of wholeness and coherence. Through her inventive rereadings of Frankenstein's gothic archetype of a disjointed body, Shelley Jackson calls attention to the existential condition of a posthuman, dispersed subject within an open and threateningly patchy universe,that after the collapse of the grand narratives looks like a loose labyrinth of forking paths. It is an idea that finds ample resonance, as Shelley Jackson's intricate metaphoric texture suggests, in the fragmented and unsteady spaces of digital textualities of new media[50], that allow manifold readings and a multiplication of meanings. As Fred Botting points out:

> In this 'postmodern condition' the breakdown of modernity's metanarratives discloses a horror that identity, reality, truth and meaning are not only effects of narratives but subject to a dispersion and multiplication of meanings, realities and identities that obliterates the possibility of imagining any human order and unity.[51]

In this perspective, her works exemplify the convergence identified by recent scholarship between postmodernism and the very root of the gothic, the idea, as Andrew Smith has put it, that "postmodernism seems to be peculiarly suited to the Gothic because it questions the notion that one inhabits a coherent or otherwise abstractly rational world.[52] In a wider horizon, Jackson's inventive adaptation of Frankenstein's archetype calls attention to the true essence of any literary work, as the expression of the intrinsically manifold nature of the human being, as Italo Calvino famously remarked in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*:

Someone might object that the more the work tends toward the multiplication of possibilities, the further it departs from that *unicum* which is the self of the writer, his inner sincerity and the discovery of his own truth. But I would answer: Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopaedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every conceivable way.[53]

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33. See George Landow-Paul Delany (eds.), *Hypermedia and Literary Studies*, Cambridge Mass., The Mitt Press 1991, p. 3. Some of the most influential studies in this perspective are Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1979 and *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

34. "The fusion of the Gothic and horror over the past decade has been a constant complaint of the critics. In fact, it has become almost impossible to distinguish horror from Gothic, prompting Luis Gross, for example, to speak of fear - which one would consider a feature of horror by default - as the

essential feature of the contemporary gothic". Dina Khapaeva, *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2017, p. 18.

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41. Shelley Jackson, *The Melancholy of Anatomy*, New York, Anchor Books, 2002, p. 15.

42. *Ibidem*, p. 59.

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45. *Ibidem*. A video has been more recently produced that rearranges a selection of 191 words into a whole new story that is read aloud, collectively, by the words themselves. Commissioned by the Berkeley Art Museum, the video was on display on their net art portal from March 1 to May 31 2011.

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