

Barbara Johnson

*The Last Man*¹

When considering a subject as broad as “the ends of man,” one can only ask oneself: *Where to start?* Where to start speaking of the end? But on the other hand, isn’t it always from the end that one starts? Isn’t every narrative in fact constructed beginning with the denouement, as every project is constructed beginning with its goal? Isn’t the end precisely that which never ceases to be repeated, which one is never done with? If man is truly, as Derrida says, “that which relates to its end,” he is also that which is never finished with ending. Thus the question would not be to know how to *begin* speaking of the end, but how to *finish* speaking of it, how to narrate something other than the interminable death of the penultimate, how to be finished with the end?

This is perhaps the question that Nietzsche poses in *Human, All-Too-Human* when he writes, under the heading of “First and Last Things,” “We look at everything through the human head and cannot cut this head off; while the question remains, What would be left of the world if it had been cut off?”² The end of man would seem then to be that which cannot be *lived* by any man. But what exactly is “human” in Nietzsche’s statement, “we look at everything through the *human* head”? The human, here, is apparently something that says “we.” And what if men were reduced only to “I”? Would the word “man” still have the same meaning if there were only one left? Would the end of man take place *before* or *after* the death of the last man? Would the final cut take place only after the death of the last man, or would it consist of his testimony, his unprecedented experience of survival? In other words, what would be the relation between the last representative of the human race and the end of man?

It is the limit-narrative of decapitation, of the cutting off of the human head with which we look at all things, that Mary Shelley attempted in a novel entitled *The Last Man*. This very long narrative, written by a woman whose birth coincides with the bloodiest moments of the French Revolution, is one of the first versions of the idea—which has become so commonplace in our atomic age—of the total extinction of the human species. Postrevolutionary but preatomic, this prophetic novel could perhaps tell us something about the strange temporality of the end of man.

In fact, in the current context Mary Shelley merits our interest in more than one respect. If she risks appearing somewhat marginal today, it's precisely her marginality that has always earned her a certain celebrity. That marginality was of two kinds: one, she lived surrounded by writers whose works strongly marked the thought and literature of the epoch: her father, William Godwin, liberal philosopher and author of *Political Justice*; her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Romantic poet and disciple of Godwin; and the many friends of Shelley, in particular the poet Byron. Aside from this marginality in the very center of the Romantic circle, Mary Shelley knew a second sort of famous nonexistence as the anonymous author of *Frankenstein*, a novel that she wrote at the age of nineteen and whose mythic power has only increased since, independently of the name and even the notion of the author. In the shadow of her parents, her husband, and her own work, Mary Shelley thus lived the Romantic period through its folds and margins. If I put the accent in this way on her marginality, it's not in order to discover for her a new centrality, but in order to analyze the new manner in which the question of marginality is inscribed in and agitates her work.

To speak of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is immediately to approach the question of *man* indirectly through what has always been at once excluded and comprehended by its definition, namely, the *woman* and the *monster*. It's undoubtedly not an accident if the conjunction of these two categories of beings has traversed history under the reassuring form of fables of the "beauty and the beast" genre—which always end by confirming the superior glory of man, since the beast is transformed into a man with whom the woman falls in love. In *Frankenstein*, the end of the story is far from reassuring, but it is precisely because the monster is not monstrous enough.

Frankenstein, as everyone knows, is the story of a scientist who, trying to create a man in his laboratory, succeeds in manufacturing a monstrous

being who ends up turning against his creator. It's the creator who is called "Frankenstein" and not the monster, who has no name, but the universal tendency to call the monster by the name of its creator is far from insignificant. Contrary to what the cinematic versions of *Frankenstein* have led us to believe, Mary Shelley's monster is not manufactured with a criminal's brain, and its creator is not crazy. Aside from a certain physical ugliness, Shelley's monster is the exact realization of the dream of its creator, to whom the project of discovering the secrets of life and of making use of them to manufacture a man had seemed the consummation of science and an inestimable benefit for humanity. But there is one detail which the creator had not foreseen: his own reaction to his creature. When he sees the yellowish eye of the one he had constructed and animated with so much effort open, Frankenstein is seized with horror and flees from the laboratory, abandoning the giant newborn to his fate. This creature whose features are roughly sutured but whose heart is good tries to find a place among men, but men always reject him with horror. Choosing to reside in the shadow of a country cottage, unknown to its inhabitants, the monster acquires a full humanist education by listening to the French lessons given by the country folk to an Arab woman. The monster, who has developed a tender sympathy for these country people, finally tries to win recognition from them, but like all human beings, they are incapable of enduring his monstrous appearance. Made furious by loneliness, the monster leaves in search of his creator, whose youngest brother he strangles when he unluckily turns up along the way. When the monster finds Frankenstein, in the shadow of Mont Blanc, he tells him his story and begs his creator to make him a wife of the same species as himself. Touched in spite of himself, Frankenstein the creator agrees to the monster's request and sets about gathering the necessary materials for this new piece of work. But suddenly the image of a new, monstrous Eve forces itself upon him and, frightened by his vision, Frankenstein ends up destroying the rough draft of the female monster. The monster, who has watched this entire process, will never forgive him for the destruction of his mate. Instead of attacking his creator directly, he murders, one after another, all those who are dear to Frankenstein, until the creator is reduced to the same isolation as his creature.

If Mary Shelley thus elaborates a work of science fiction which seems to caution us against the fictions of science, it is not, however, only in order to suggest that there are limits which man has no right to overstep. For far from marking the *limits* of the human, Shelley's monster is noth-

ing but the perfect realization of the humanist project par excellence: mastery of the knowledge of man. The chemical details of Frankenstein's experiment are only the *literalization* of the desire to give oneself a total representation of man, to master the origins of man to the point of being able to create one. The monster is thus not what remains *exterior* to the humanist conception of man; it is the figure of that conception itself to the extent that "man" is precisely a creation of man. This perfectly reasonable monster, whose wickedness is entirely explained by the injustices that are inflicted on him, is a perfect example of man such as he was created by the Enlightenment philosophes, for whom the human being par excellence was Western, rational, and masculine. It's no accident if the humanist-creator can't or doesn't want to create a woman equal to her man, or if the monster's education is presented as a *Westernization*. (The lessons he overhears are those given by Europeans to an Arab woman. It is also interesting to note that, in order to recover from the shock of the catastrophic creation, Frankenstein begins to study, precisely, Oriental languages.) Thus if Mary Shelley's novel constitutes a critique of humanism, that critique is directed not against the hubris of the humanist who takes himself for God, but against the blindness of the humanist who can't see himself. In gathering and sewing materials with the design of creating a human, Frankenstein never doubts for an instant that he knows what a human is. But the creature only has to open his eyes, the object only has to become subject for Frankenstein not to recognize him anymore and for him literally to lose consciousness (or knowledge—"connaissance"—Tr.). The *unknown* is not located in the object of humanism, but in the desiring humanist subject. That which the humanist remains blind to in his efforts to know man is the nature of his own desire to know man. That blindness is moreover represented within the novel by the total lack of explanation concerning the motives which led the creator to reject his creature so violently. This explanatory ellipsis has always been considered a grave defect in the novel by readers who were looking to follow the psychological logic. But it is precisely by this sort of logical flaw, this blind spot in the explanation of human desire, that something like psychology can be elaborated.

The humanist's blindness in relation to his own desire to know is illustrated in an exemplary way by Rousseau in the preface to his *Discourse on the Origin and Causes of Inequality Among Men*, by the way in which he understands the meaning of the inscription of Delphi, "The most useful and

the least advanced of all human knowledge seems to me to be that of man; and I dare say that the inscription of the temple of Delphi alone contained a precept more important and more difficult than all the thick volumes of the moralists.”³ As opposed to Rousseau’s project, the story of Frankenstein seems to affirm that if one translates in this way the command to know oneself as a command to know *man*, one risks losing contact monstrously with what one doesn’t know.

Curiously, in the article by Jacques Derrida on “The Ends of Man,” one finds in an unexpected way this idea of monstrosity linked to the critique of a tradition deformed by a humanist view:

After the war, under the name of . . . existentialism . . . , the thought that dominated France presented itself essentially as humanist. . . . [T]he major concept, the theme of the last analysis, the irreducible horizon and origin is what was then called “human reality.” As is well-known, this is a translation of Heideggerian *Dasein*. A *monstrous translation* in many respects, but so much the more significant.⁴

Would this Derridean monster be the modern reincarnation of Shelley’s monster? Would monstrosity always exist as a function of humanist translation? Are there nonhumanist monsters? nonmonstrous translations?

In our day the myth of Frankenstein is ceaselessly invoked by the newspapers apropos of babies conceived in a test tube and, more recently, apropos of the creation of new forms of bacteria by the recombination of their genetic codes. In the context of debates over the commercial and juridical status of these new forms of life, the question of man finds itself curiously reopened. Having to decide whether the law governing the distribution of patents applied or not to the invention of living beings, the Supreme Court of the United States decreed that life was indeed susceptible to be patented since, in the words of former Chief Justice Burger (quoted in *Time*), “the issue is ‘not between living and inanimate things, but between products of nature—whether living or not—and human-made inventions.’”⁵ In other words, it’s the opposition between man and nature which here takes over from the worn-out opposition between life and death. All the more so in that, in our day, the legal status of death is itself submitted to the opposition between natural means and technological means of maintaining life. Thus if man is indeed that which is determined beginning with his end, his end is, more and more, that which can be determined only beginning with man.

This question of man suspended between life and death returns us finally to that second untimely meditation of Mary Shelley—untimely for her time but ardently timely for our own—namely, her other novel entitled precisely *The Last Man*. While *Frankenstein* was the story of the one who was superfluous in the world of men, *The Last Man* is the story of the one who is superfluous in a world without men. It's the story of the one who remains. Now, what does this remainder of humanity signify in relation to the question of the ends of man?

But first of all, a question is indispensable: Why couldn't such a story be entitled *The Last Woman*? Or rather, why is it that a novel entitled *The Last Woman* would be automatically interpreted—as one sees in the film of that title by Marco Ferreri—as the story of the last love of a man or else as a narrative of castration? Would the idea that humanity could not end with a woman have something to do with the ends of *man*?

In reality, although the narrator of this book speaks in the first person masculine singular, he belongs, like the monster, to a sort of third sex. He resembles neither the men nor the women of the novel. He serves the function of witness, of survivor, and of scribe. As we will see, it is the same role that Mary Shelley plays at the moment when she writes her novel.

The story of *The Last Man* takes place in Europe near the end of the twenty-first century. The main characters are few: aside from the narrator Lionel Verney and his sister Perdita, we count Adrian and Idris, children of the last king of England; Lord Raymond, hero of the Greek wars; and Evadne Zaimi, a Greek princess who lives in England. In the year 2073, the king of England, father of Adrian and Idris, abdicates to permit the creation of an English republic. The royal family withdraws to Windsor. After many sentimental and political vicissitudes, the narrator Verney marries Idris, the former king's daughter; the hero Raymond marries Perdita, sister of the narrator; Adrian, who had been in love with the princess Evadne, remains alone; and Evadne, in love with Raymond, disappears. Raymond, for whom the tranquil life at Windsor begins to be a burden, gets elected Lord Protector of England and throws himself immediately into innumerable projects for the good of humanity. By a series of accidents, Raymond rediscovers the Greek princess Evadne, reduced to a life of misery and still in love with him. Raymond, who tries to remedy her misery, doesn't speak of the princess to his wife Perdita, but she nevertheless begins to suspect something. As the misunderstanding between the spouses becomes irreparable, Raymond resigns his post and

leaves England to join the Greek army once again. The Greeks are about to achieve victory over the Turks; the Greek army needs only to take Constantinople. The Greeks besiege the city. But the besieged city becomes more and more silent. Constantinople has fallen under the sway of the Plague. The armies separate without combat, making way for a plague-ridden peace.

England once again becomes the scene of the action. For several years, the English believe themselves sheltered from the Plague that devastates the entire Orient. But little by little this scourge takes over Europe and England until the last English survivors decide to leave their island to wait for death in a gentler climate. At every step, the circle of the survivors is circumscribed, but nothing stops the progress of the Plague, which is always fatal. Verney, the narrator, is the only one among all human beings to recover from it. He is thus more than a survivor; he is a ghost. When humanity is reduced to three beings—Raymond, Adrian, and the daughter of Raymond and Perdita—these three survivors decide to embark on a sailing ship for Greece. The boat is shipwrecked; Verney remains alone. Searching for a fellow creature, he goes to Rome, where he spends a year writing and waiting. Finally convinced that no one will come meet him in Rome, he climbs to the top of St. Peter's to carve in stone the following inscription: "the aera 2100, last year of the world." Then, accompanied only by his dog, he embarks for unknown shores.

The life of Mary Shelley was also a series of survivals. Beginning with her birth, which cost her mother her life. At the moment when Mary Shelley wrote *The Last Man*, three of her four children had died, her husband Percy Shelley had drowned in a shipwreck, and Byron had just died in Greece. At the age of twenty-six, she considered herself the last relic of an extinct race.

One could thus affirm that in writing *The Last Man* Mary Shelley only painted her mourning on a universal scale. But that universal scale, that universal perspective on human affairs was just the one which ordinarily characterized the writings of the Romantic poets, especially those of Shelley and Byron. Thus Mary Shelley takes over a typically Romantic style in order to say what she sees as the end of Romanticism. In other words, in this novel, Mary Shelley does more than give a universal vision of her mourning; she mourns for a certain type of universal vision.

For that vision is precisely that of Verney and his companions. In going to seek other survivors in Rome, birthplace of *homo humanus*, Mary

Shelley's last man performs the humanist gesture par excellence: he seeks to live the death of all of humanity. On his way, he leaves two kinds of messages, two sorts of "please forward": first, in three languages, he writes, "Verney, last of the race of Englishmen, had taken up his abode in Rome"; second, in Italian, "Friend, come! I wait for thee." To speak of oneself in the third person of the past tense is to take oneself for a historical character, that is, a dead man. To make an invitation in the second person, in the other's language, is still to expect to live. But after a year of vain waiting in Rome, Verney realizes that he doesn't know how to speak the other's language anymore, for he doesn't know any longer who the other might be. It becomes clear that all roads lead to Rome only for a certain Western culture which can no longer take itself for the voice of humanity in its entirety. In leaving Rome to seek an unknown otherness, Verney also stops writing. In designating the year of his departure the last year of the world, the last man thus marks the survival of humanist discourse, that is, of the possibility of making history. And yet, in setting off to wander in search of an unknown destiny, smitten with a culture that he knows to be obsolete, but incapable of forging for himself a postplague discourse, Verney could not symbolize better the very condition of modern Western man. How indeed can one survive humanism? How can one create a language that is postplague, that is, postuniversal?

But what does the Plague signify in this book? In *The Plague*, Albert Camus writes, "In this respect our townfolk were like everybody else, wrapped up in themselves; in other words they were humanists: they disbelieved in pestilences. A pestilence isn't a thing made to man's measure."⁶ It is evident that, for Mary Shelley as well, the Plague is that which man's measures can neither foresee nor master. All systems for the amelioration of man's lot pass in review in this novel, only to end in a blind alley in front of the Plague. The Plague is at once that which stops all systems of meaning from functioning and that against which those systems are necessarily erected.

But just before having them swallowed up by the scourge, Mary Shelley outlines a critique of each of the projects of reform dear to her father William Godwin and her husband Percy Shelley. In other words, each time we are about to draw a lesson from the narrative of political events, the Plague arrives to erase the question. The book does indeed contain a series of critiques, but *there is no relation* between these critiques and the train of events. The Plague itself seems neither entirely unavoidable nor

entirely avoidable. Where the poet Percy Shelley, apropos of the French Revolution, spoke of an inadequacy, a “defect of correspondence between the knowledge existing in society and the improvement or gradual abolition of political institutions,”⁷ Mary Shelley sees not a defect of correspondence but a *lack of relation* between acquired knowledge and the scene of action.

But the Plague is not only that which stops us from drawing lessons from human events. For it enters the plot at a very precise and significant moment of the novel. The Western world is about to fend off definitively the threat of the East. The Greeks need only to take Constantinople for victory to be complete. But the capture of Constantinople will never happen. Where Western man expects to encounter and to master his other, he finds himself faced with the absolute Other. The novel never tells us the political consequences of this suspension of the final confrontation between East and West. The question of the relation or of the nonrelation between East and West remains open, precisely by the way in which it is badly posed. The Plague, which extends out over the entire world from the point of encounter between East and West, is thus in a sense that which replaces the victory of the West over the East. Its lethal universality is a nightmarish version of the desire to establish a universal discourse, to spread equality and fraternity throughout the world. Thus the universal empire of the Plague would not be only, as Camus suggests, what is *excluded* from Western humanism; it would also be its *inverted image*.

It is not an accident if *The Last Man* begins with praise of England, that England which was mistress of the world’s most powerful empire:

I am the native of a sea-surrounded nook, a cloud-enshadowed land, which, when the surface of the globe, with its shoreless ocean and trackless continents, presents itself to my mind, appears only as an inconsiderable speck in the immense whole; and yet, when balanced in the scale of mental power, far outweighed countries of larger extent and more numerous population. So true it is, that man’s mind alone was the creator of all that was good or great to man, and that Nature herself was only his first minister. England, seated far north in the turbid sea, now visits my dreams in the semblance of a vast and well-manned ship, which mastered the winds and rode proudly over the waves. In my boyish days she was the universe to me. When I stood on my native hills . . . the earth’s very centre was fixed for me in that spot, and the rest of her orb was as a fable, to have forgotten which would have cost neither my imagination nor understanding an effort.⁸

This image of England as mental mastery, inviolable insularity, self-sufficient centrality, is in fact the image of a certain conception of *man* which will be progressively demystified throughout the novel that follows. But this pitiless demystification is narrated as a series of privations and unendurable sorrows. At each step, one loses again a fatherland which never existed. The story of *The Last Man* is in the last analysis the story of modern Western man torn between mourning and deconstruction.

In a certain sense, one can say that modern literature begins with this end of man, at the moment when the last man leaves Rome without knowing what language to speak to it. It is interesting to note that in the novel by Maurice Blanchot also entitled *The Last Man*, one no longer finds any traditional narrative landmarks. Even the certainty that this is indeed a *narrative* is acquired only in the form of a strange joy, on the last page of the book, "Later, he asked himself how he had entered the calm. He couldn't talk about it with himself. Only joy at feeling he was in harmony with the words: 'Later, he. . .'"⁹ In this end of the book, it's thus a certain relation to language which ends by at once confirming and denying the end, solitude, the possibility of speaking.

Before this last page, Blanchot's book presents itself as a monologue cut into two unequal parts. In the first part, there is an "I," a "he," and a "she" who find themselves in a sort of asylum. After the break between the two parts, the word "event" appears, but the reader no longer knows who is speaking, nor to whom, nor of whom, nor of what event. In other words, in Blanchot's *Last Man* all that remains of traditional "lastmanism" is the questions which the theme obliges us automatically to ask. For a book entitled *The Last Man* is manifestly an impossible book. If the last man is a "he," who is writing the book? If the last man is an "I," who is reading it? Unless the reader is dead . . .

But the reader is inscribed in Mary Shelley's book precisely as dead. At the moment when Verney decides to write the story of the end of man, he begins with the following dedication:

TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD.
SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL!
BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE
LAST MAN.

If man is the one to whom the end is important, it is evident that Verney possesses the most important story that has ever been told. But those to

whom that story is important are all necessarily dead. In a certain sense, the story of the end interests only the dead. For to the living, what matters isn't the end, but the future perfect.

Indeed, from the title on, *The Last Man* presents itself as a particularly striking example of the functioning of the future perfect. While normally the future perfect is the tense itself where the meaning of a story is tied up, *The Last Man* promises the reader only a future in which he will not be able to have read the novel. By his reading, the reader only approaches retrospectively his own elimination, while the last man continues beyond his end. But the temporality of this narrative is further complicated by a supplementary fold, an author's introduction which tells us that this story of the last man that we have under our eyes is in reality only the imperfect and doubtless deformed translation of certain inscriptions found in 1818 on scattered leaves in the cavern of the Sybil of Cumae. What is at issue is thus a translation made in the nineteenth century of a prophecy uttered in Antiquity which takes the form of a narrative written by a man of the twenty-first century on the subject of the end of man. The end of man, in other words, will have always already coincided with the moment of predicting, the moment of translating, and the moment of writing. Unless, however, this is an error of translation.

24. Ed. J. Paul Hunter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), pp. 241–251.

The Last Man

1. Originally published as “Le dernier homme,” in *Les fins de l’homme. A partir du travail de Jacques Derrida. 23 juillet–2 août 1980*, ed. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1980).
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, Part I, trans. Helen Zimmern (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), p. 20.
3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, trans. Roger D. and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1964), p. 91.
4. Jacques Derrida, “The Ends of Man,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 115.
5. *Time*, June 30, 1980, p. 52.
6. Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Knopf, 1977), p. 35.
7. Percy Bysshe Shelley, Preface, “The Revolt of Islam,” *Poetical Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 33.
8. Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, ed. Hugh J. Luke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 5.
9. Maurice Blanchot, *The Last Man*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 89.

My Monster/My Self

1. Nancy Friday, *My Mother/My Self* (New York: Dell, 1977); Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1976); Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (New York: Signet, 1965). Ed.—As is narrated both in the general Introduction to this volume and in Felman’s Afterword (to Part Two), Johnson’s initial teaching and lecturing on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (a teaching which will soon give birth to the splendid “My Monster/My Self”) takes place in a Yale course on narrative (1980), in which the assigned classroom text of *Frankenstein* (determined in advance by the course’s team of teachers) is the 1965 Signet edition, from which Johnson will cite *Frankenstein* in this and other essays. Johnson remains attached to this first object of her teaching— and all her subsequent citations of *Frankenstein*, both in her early essays (in Part One) and in her last book, *Mary Shelley and Her Circle* (in Part Two)— are to this Signet Classics 1965 edition, which reproduces *Frankenstein* in its third (1831) historical edition.

Shelley was seventeen when she completed her writing of the novel in May 1817, and *Frankenstein* was first published in January 1818 by a small London publishing house. This original edition was issued anonymously, with a preface written for Mary by Percy Bysshe Shelley (but without signature), and with