Monstrous Bodies: Freakish Forms and Strange Conceptions in *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*

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Andrew Halfnight, the narrator of Eric McCormack's gothic novel *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, is born with a twin sister wedged tightly against his chest. Once prised apart, they leave permanent birthmarks on each other: "a dark purple stain in the shape of a triangle marked the upper body area, from nipple to nipple to belly-button, of both me and my sister. The shape looked vaguely like a dog's head, or maybe some kind of rodent" (4). This stain defines Andrew as "monstrous" or "freakish," because it signifies his strangely conjoined physical being (always himself and always, in part, his dead sister) and because it aligns him with the animal world (always himself and always, in part, something canine or rodent-like). In this novel filled with satiric references to Presbyterianism, the stain suggests preordained doom. Andrew's sense of monstrosity, diagnosed by a psychiatrist as "'lingering trauma'" (235), results from his physical marking, combined with his uneasy relation to his mother's body and his Calvinist contempt for flesh. Women, especially his mother and his Aunt Lizzie, horrify Andrew. He loves them and loathes them. He fears they desire him, and he fears desiring them in turn. Uneasily inhabiting his marked body, Andrew alleviates his anguish by repudiating desire and displacing monstrosity onto women.

In *The First Blast of the Trumpet*, discourses of deformity, derived from John Knox, Robert Burton, John Milton, and other Renaissance writers, make Andrew's body a palimpsest of past and present attitudes towards the freakish. Although McCormack's writing is always darkly comic, in the tradition of grotesque narrative that evokes nervous tit-

ters—grotesquery is the "victory of laughter over fear" (Bakhtin 90)—his preoccupation with monstrosity raises the problem of defining the postmodern body. Medical, political, anthropological, and other representations overlay the body. Moreover, the body accumulates historical representations that have no scientific validity but that persist nonetheless, such as the belief that epilepsy is a divine disease, or that lines criss-crossing the palms predict destiny. For McCormack, the body, medium of personality and instrument of dark deeds, verges on unknowable otherness. Competing discourses and representations make the body indecipherable. Two crucial features of the postmodern body emerge in *The First Blast of the Trumpet*: the body is discursive as well as material; monstrosity is a psychological disorder more than a physical one.

Monsters occupy all four books of fiction that Eric McCormack has published to date. In *Inspecting the Vaults* (1987), a collection of Borgesian short stories, bodies are split into antagonistic doubles, such as detectives and criminals, jailers and prisoners, talkers and listeners, doctors and patients.[1] These identities blur: listeners become talkers; doctors need medical attention. Siblings supposed to be twins, but "condemned to one body" (*Inspecting the Vaults* 260), resemble a *foetus in foetu*, a birth disorder in which one foetus grows within another and protrudes from it.[2] In *The Paradise Motel* (1989), bodies are represented at the limits of disfigurement and pain. A baby with "no arms or legs" is exhibited at a carnival: "it had a mouth and eyes set into a little mound where its neck should have been" (140). A novel about serial deaths, *The Mysterium* (1992) depicts the body in decay. "'The body is nothing but a food supply for a million maggots,'" one character conjectures: "'they're camped inside of us, all our lives. Look in a mirror, and you see them skulking around just under the skin'" (*Mysterium* 202). Maggot-invested, bodies assume horrifying qualities—a reminder of death that cannot be wished away. The death drive deforms everyone; our deaths written into our flesh, we view the body as a monstrous perversion of ideal existence.

Grotesquery arises when people and animals merge. Maggots, for instance, lurk beneath human skin. Sometimes McCormack meta-

phorizes transgression between animal and human realms. In *The Mysterium*, copulating couples look like "a white beast of many limbs" (41). An aging gentleman has skin like "a snake's when it is near shedding" (*Paradise Motel* 98). Sometimes animal-human transgression is a narrative event. In *The Paradise Motel*, lizards are force-fed into the stomachs of pubescent boys as a rite of passage (80). Shamans in a South American tribe have an eye coaxed millimeter by millimeter from its socket and worked around the cranium, until it appears at the back of the skull (*Paradise Motel* 77). The shamans look like humanoid bugs. Another tribe inducts young men into the cult of arachnid worship by slowly twisting a young boy's spine and clamping it in place, until the spider-child's "torso is turned one-hundred-and-eighty degrees around, and the boy's face is directly over his buttocks" (*Inspecting the Vaults* 35). Restructuring the human body continues by "grafting four thick membranes of human flesh [...] onto his arms and legs" so that the transformation of boy into spider has greater verisimilitude (*Inspecting the Vaults* 35). To animalize the body is to dissociate it completely from consciousness or mind.

As in McCormack's earlier three books, freakishness abounds in *The First Blast of the Trumpet* (1997). Andrew begins to like his foster-brothers when he sees them as "gargoyles" (132). Henry Greene, a sailor, tattoos his arm with an anchor, which makes self-alienation visible: a wish for stability registers as a totemic mark on the skin. One of Andrew's girlfriends, a psychiatric patient named Amber Tristesse, has "a hole in her skull surrounded by a ridge of shrivelled flesh" (205) where her left ear should be. Among numerous examples of maiming in the novel, Andrew's father has an amputated arm; in a scene reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, crows peck his corpse to a pulp after he hurls himself, fatally, into a gully. Andrew's Aunt Lizzie bashes her husband's head with a lava rock. Failing at the first murder attempt, she renews her efforts with impenitent vigour some weeks later. No one's body in this novel escapes marking or injury. Monstrous desires, felt internally, manifest themselves outwardly as acts of destruction and mutilation. Yet scars and wounds individualize the body. Scarred

bodies proclaim traumas that have been survived. In Andrew's case, his stain stands for the trauma of birth. In McCormack's fiction, such marks indicate the non-conformity of the body with regimes of power that materialize and regulate bodies. Whereas Judith Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter* that the material body "is fully sedimented with discourses on sex and sexuality," she also claims that "injuries or violations" (29) define bodiliness. Hence the scarred or injured body tells a story of attempts to conform to paradigms of sexuality, as well as penalties inflicted for failure. For McCormack, the scarred body materializes non-conformity, but not just to regimes of sexuality. The marked body speaks for manifold perversities of the unconscious, which can find no other medium to broadcast its presence than through the body. Unable to fulfill the demands of strict sexual, religious, or social identification, McCormack's characters imagine themselves monsters.

Monstrosity consists in a crossing of borders that separate one identity from another, where male becomes female, or human becomes animal. As Elizabeth Grosz claims, the human monster jeopardizes categories: "freaks cross the borders that divide the subject from all ambiguities, interconnections, and reciprocal classifications" (57). Thus, the hermaphrodite combines male and female sexual organs; the proverbial Bearded Lady confounds gender classifications; and Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy migrates between human and animal. Similarly, the human giant, like the Irishman in Hilary Mantel's novel *The Giant, O'Brien* or the carnival queen in Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, mediates between clod and god, maladroit because so huge, yet reminiscent of primordial Greek titans descended from ur-forces. Monstrosity begins in bodily difference, then extends into the psychic life of "normalcy," where difference becomes internalized (*I am a freak*) or repudiated (*I am not a freak*). It excuses out-of-control anxiety (*I'm freaking out*). Such monstrosity depends on the exhibition of difference. The term "monster" is etymologically related to the Latin noun *monstrum* (a sign, wonder, or warning) and the Latin verb *monstrare* (to display or to show). A monster must be seen to be feared, though the monster often remains invisible, grasped only by remnants—a foot-

print, a bone, a blurry photograph—or by non-verbal noise, as when Frankenstein's monster howls fiendishly outside his creator's laboratory. Lingering on the boundary between visibility and invisibility, a monster inspires fear by virtue of its unlocatability. The monster may be a sign or warning, but a sign that yokes together multiple fears.

Monsters traverse media. Early modern writers and thinkers understood monsters as natural wonders, and many collectors kept giants' bones, deformed foetuses, or other rarities of profuse nature in *Wunderkammern* in order to contemplate deviance. In the late 1600s, encyclopedias of monsters exaggerate the number of specimens of nonconformity; James Paris du Plessis's illustrated omnium gatherum is entitled *A Short History of Human Prodigies and Monstrous Births, of Dwarfs, Sleepers, Giants, Strong Men, Hermaphrodites, Numberous Births and Extreme Old Age, Etc* (Semonin 69–81). The monster turns novelistic in the nineteenth century. Doctor Frankenstein's glaucous-eyed creature is pieced together from several corpses' limbs and organs. H. G. Wells's Doctor Moreau creates hybrid mammals on his island laboratory. Contemporary monsters are part machine, part human—creatures fabricated in television and movie studios. Cyborgs, the flesh-and-blood, artificial beings that populate *Blade Runner* and *Star Trek*, underlie cultural fantasies of human "character [that] has been reshaped by the total integration of technology with the body" (Clayton 65). In this regard, monsters, registering social distrust of science, revert to primitive behaviour, tribal organization, and pre-industrial technologies.

Between the early modern and postmodern periods, the study of monsters shifts emphasis from physical description to psychology. The term "monster," according to Leslie Fiedler, differs from the term "freak." Fiedler claims that freaks inspire "supernatural terror and natural sympathy" (24) because they are the products of nature, not imagination; when we look at them, we see ourselves, or nature, disturbed. Monsters, on the other hand, are fantastic projections found in novels and films. They do not originate in nature. Fiedler views freaks as archetypal examples of human imperfection. Robert Bogdan, however,

resists this notion of the physiological determination of freakishness. For Bogdan, all freaks are socially constructed: "'freak' is not a quality that belongs to the person on display. It is something that we created: a perspective, a set of practices—a social construction" (xi). This may be true, but Bogdan does not explain the "perspective" or "practices" that go into the invention of monsters. Susan Stewart suggests that miniature and gigantic bodies emblematize psychic interiority. Spectators of physical prodigies look at their own interiority, and, more specifically, their own erotic sensibilities writ large or small in the bodies of others. The gigantic exemplifies an individual's sense of position within a collective, whereas the miniature permits the individual to exert domination over property and to regulate intimacy between the self and the world. "The freak," Stewart claims, "must be linked not to lived sexuality but to certain forms of the pornography of distance" (110). The freakish body—hirsute, two-headed, gigantic, hermaphroditic, dwarfish—occupies a position in the fantasy life of the spectator and mirrors the libidinal surges and retractions of the spectator. Stewart collapses the distinction that Fiedler makes between "monster" and "freak" by foregrounding the act of looking in the construction of the anomalous body. Where there is spectating, there is libidinal investment.

As a social phenomenon that encompasses Milton's Sin and Death, Godzilla, Siamese twins, and Fe-Fi-Fo-Fum giants, monsters register desires too elicit to name. The monster squashes differences between physical reality and imaginative constructions. King Kong does not exist, so what psychological need calls him into existence? There is no easy answer to the question, for monsters frequently elude capture. The Sasquatch and the Loch Ness monster cannot be readily photographed. The monster represents freedom, since, like Frankenstein's creation, it acts out fantasies of homicide without punishment, and desire without containment. As Jeffery Jerome Cohen argues, "the monster awakens one to the pleasures of the body, to the simple and fleeting joys of being frightened, or frightening—to the experience of mortality and corporality" (17). Pleasure, displaced onto the monster, is not an end in itself. The monster, even though it enlivens the sense of pleasure

and fear, is repudiated, just as Frankenstein loathes his creation and spurns him. Capturing monsters means conquering unruly desires or misguided fantasies about the body. Monsters encode misunderstandings about physiology (conception, gestation, circulation, genetics) or psychology (imagination, desire, instinct, aggression, unconscious). A disproportionate number of monsters involve fantasies of pregnancy and birth. Ambroise Paré's 1573 book *Des Monstres et Prodiges*, illustrated with woodcuts of two-headed children and headless torsos, implies that monstrosity occurs at conception or birth. Milton's Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost* enact a fantasy of the animalized female body. Frankenstein serves as both mother and father to his horrible progeny. The pleasure that the monster evokes may be the repressed knowledge of the mother's pleasure. Defiance of monsters is denial of maternal pleasure.

In his fiction, McCormack repeatedly demonstrates that freakishness combines both the internalized sense of monstrous otherness and the visibility of otherness in tropes of maternity. In "A Train of Gardens," Ireneus Fludd, the offspring of a biology professor and a "moral weakling" (*Inspecting the Vaults* 169), is kept in an aquarium-like plastic womb for eighteen years. Fludd's mother and father suspend gestation indefinitely. Ireneus sprouts ichthyic reddish-black bristles and his eyes turn blue-green as he paddles around his placental environment. Scientifically watching "the monster's daily growth" (*Inspecting the Vaults* 170), the Fludds impose monstrosity on Ireneus by isolating him in the tank and by prolonging his pre-natal life. Incarcerated in the transparent plastic womb, he displays his parents' shame, as well as their genetic manipulation and moral failing. "A Train of Gardens" is a parable about bio-ethics. Science without morals produces monstrosity; so, too, do morals without science.

As McCormack's fiction proves, the body is not the same as discourses that surround the body. Descriptions of the body—as a map of genetic codes, as a machine, as a function of class, as a reflector of moral health, as a digestive tube, as a vessel for bacteria, as a conjunction of H_20 and minerals, as a temple of the soul—exist independently of the

material body. Although we know we have genes and blood vessels, the ways in which we imagine them determine the point at which objectivity ends and culture begins. Donna Haraway, writing about this split between the factuality of the body and contemporary biomedical conceptions of the body, states that "while the late twentieth-century immune system, for example, is a construct of an elaborate apparatus of bodily production, neither the immune system nor any other of biology's world-changing bodies—like a virus or an ecosystem—is a ghostly fantasy" (298). Social, political, and religious necessities determine representations of the body. Monstrosity points to the ways that a culture assimilates or fails to assimilate knowledge of itself and nature, and the ways that a culture represents, and responds to, its knowledge of the body.

Science cannot restrain the fantasies that a culture generates about bodies. Gastroenterology does not account for the film *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*. Knowledge of genes and viruses does not usurp widespread belief in palmistry. Nor did the scientific revolution, championed by Francis Bacon, eradicate all superstitions about the body. In his attempt to anatomize nature in *Novum Organum*, Bacon establishes three mutually exclusive categories: "the first state refers to the *species* of things; the second to *monsters*; the third to *things artificial*" (110). Humanist science, in Bacon's model, classifies things according to whether they are normal, deviant, or man-made. This seemingly hard-and-fast classificatory system does not forbid Renaissance superstition from interpreting deviance as a divine sign. Science does not abolish prior systems of belief at one go. In the Renaissance, as Stephen Pender argues, science in general and dissection in particular could not negate popular understanding of the body as a "vast and insistent index of natural and political worlds" (146). Science attempted to show that the body, regardless of its shape, was just a body, and human character could not be demonstrated in blood or nerves or skeletal structure. By contrast, the superstitious notion persisted that the body in its symmetry or its disproportion reflected spiritual purity or unholiness. In his 1569 translation of Pierre Boaistuau's *Histoires Prodigieuses*, Edward Fenton says

that nothing ravishes the sense more "than the mo[n]sters, wonders and abominations, wherein we see the workes of Nature, not only turned [adverslie], misshapen and deformed, but (which is more) they do for the most part discover unto us the secret judgem[en]t and scourge of the ire of God" (qtd. in Pender 154).

As early modern science attempted to overcome phantasmic projections of the body (*monsters and bogeymen do not exist*), a discourse of mind-body antithesis made the body inimical to rationality. Montaigne's essay "On Cripples" and Shakespeare's representation of Caliban in *The Tempest* might be taken as points of departure for conceptions of the self divided between reason and bodily representations. For Montaigne, prodigies of the imagination, because they are irrational, seem more monstrous than bodily deformities. He excuses deformity as mere nature and concludes, with reference to his capacity for ignorance and wonder, "I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself" (787). Such an evaluation makes the interiority of the mind more important than external forms—a step forward for rationality, but, in consequence, a diminution of the body as a signifying entity. Caliban, not lacking for revolutionary plots against Prospero, is the ugly, early modern sign of what happens to insurrectionary imagination. Applying a simplified historical schema, one might say that the Renaissance division of mind from body culminates in Descartes's *cogito*. The Cartesian formulation of the mind's radical independence from the body leads to a conception of the body as something to be amputated, or, at the least, dismissed. Descartes writes, "if a foot, or an arm, or any other part, is separated from my body, it is certain that, on that account, nothing has been taken away from my mind" (164). Although this medieval *demonstratio* proves the superiority of the whole to its parts, the proposition, interpreted otherwise, assumes a punitive relation towards the body. Nothing may be lost from the mind, but something has been surely lost from the body. Distinguishing integral mind from partial body suggests that reason exceeds corporeality. Contempt for the flesh bespeaks enlightenment.

McCormack, a professor of Renaissance literature, habitually invokes early modern examples of monstrosity as parallels to his representations of bodies.[3] In *The First Blast of the Trumpet*, Andrew reads *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, in which Robert Burton describes the female body, asyntactically, as "a rotten carcass, crooked back, she stoops and is lame, splay-footed, as slender in the middle as a Cow in the waist, gouty legs, her ankles hang over her shoes, her feet stink, she breeds lice, a mere changeling, a very monster, or an oaf, imperfect, her whole complexion savours, an harsh voice, vile gait, a vast virago" (138). Andrew transcribes this passage verbatim. Invocations of Burton, Milton, and Knox create a discourse of women's bodies that emphasizes opprobrium. The postmodern representation of Andrew Halfnight's own body is a response to, and a redoubling of, early modern freakishness, often sedimented in ideologies of gender. Moreover, Renaissance superstitions and prodigies exacerbate Andrew's sense of self-division. Like a Cartesian, Andrew, suffering from the vicious attacks of a snarling "mote" (223), imagines that his body rebels against his mind. A conflicted Christian repelled by fleshliness, he acquires this idea of the mote from a billboard that quotes Matthew 7:3, "Cast the beam out of thine own eye and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye" (216). Misinterpreting this command, Andrew treats the mote as a physical, not spiritual, entity. The mote, a projection of antagonism from within, embodies Andrew's moral impurity (he's an unworthy Christian) and his unconscious dread of women (he's an unworthy lover and son). Invoking a Calvinist vocabulary of election, Andrew imagines that he has been "chosen" (226) for physical punishment for reasons he cannot divine. Andrew is a composite of religious beliefs and physical disgusts laid over twentieth-century discourses of psychoanalysis and alienation.

In a psychoanalytic sense, the mote that afflicts Andrew is a recurrent trauma about his own body and the bodies of women that he can cure only by a return to the origins of his despair. His trauma has several causes, including guilt about having survived his twin. The death of his sister at the hands of his father forces him to think about his

own possible demise; his mother saves his life by "choosing to place my sister rather than me in the lethal arms of Thomas Halfnight, my father" (19). His mother refuses to explain the meaning of the "purple stain" (19) on Andrew's chest, though it clearly recalls his sister's death. His mother implicitly blames him for living. Not knowing why he has a birthmark, Andrew thinks his body alien, a legend he cannot understand.

In retaliation for having brought him into the world, Andrew's mother draws attention to her own body as she prepares to die. Eerily, Mrs Halfnight asks her adolescent son to bathe her. If, as theorists of gothic fiction maintain, gothic narrative is motivated by a repressed knowledge of the mother's body that leads to a later, crucial recognition of the mother's centrality in psychic life (Kahane 335), Andrew differs from the standard gothic plot in that recognition of the maternal body is imposed upon him. Forced to wash his mother's diseased body, with its withered skin and drooping flesh, he has to quell whatever oedipal desire he feels. "That was the first time I saw a woman's body unclothed," Andrew remarks in his usual deadpan fashion, then he sponges her "dark nipples" and "belly" (27) while his mother commands him to continue:

> I would have stopped at that for I was afraid to proceed.
>
> "You're not nearly finished," she said. Her green eyes were on me.
>
> So I soaped the sponge and carried on. She opened her legs so that I could bathe between them and down the inside of her legs.
>
> I towelled her off and helped her turn over. I was relieved not to have to undergo the scrutiny of her eyes any more. I breathed more freely as I bathed her from head to foot. (27–8)

Andrew's short, flat sentences imply hesitation and repression. His breath catches as his mother watches. When he finishes, his mother

thanks him without any trace of irony. Andrew, perpetually understated, is "delighted" (28) to please her.

All Andrew's subsequent, difficult relations to women's bodies are conditioned by this exposure to the ailing, maternal body. Lust invariably returns him to this primal scene in which he functions as care-giver and stand-in lover, a shy Oedipus not up to the task of meeting his mother's eyes. Hence, Andrew's pathological anxieties about women and lust are manifest through a sense of inadequacy. If, in Lacanian terms, desire appears in the split between need and demand, and demand invariably exceeds need, desire can never be satisfied. In Andrew's case, however, the desire that he did not even know he had is met and exceeded by his mother's knowledge of his desires. Worse than that (for Andrew's psychological equanimity), this conception of desire is based on a child's need in conflict with an imperious mother's need, which becomes the paradigm for subsequent encounters with female sexuality. Later, no amount of science or story-telling alleviates Andrew's fleshly suffering caused by this emotional degradation in which his desires fail to measure up. Andrew feels guilty because he has desires.

Andrew therefore inhabits a body susceptible to monstrosity. His lust is on display in his dog-faced birthmark, glyph of bodily imperfection and indelible reminder of his sister's and mother's deaths. His mother's refusal to explain his birthmark amplifies his shame and imposes mystery on his body. Peter Brooks argues that "a monster is that outcome or product of curiosity or epistemophilia [investigation rooted in a desire to know about the body] that results [...] in confusion, blindness, and exile" (218). Andrew's curiosity about his past and his guilt get him nowhere because he can never rationalize his bodily self. The birthmark proves that his parents felt lust. Andrew is the result of their fornication. Possessing a body, about which he is curious and at which others stare, traumatizes him. Andrew cannot escape this trauma because he cannot shed his body. Andrew lives in confusion, psychosomatic blindness, and wandering exile. To have a body, in his world-view, automatically entails sinning and suffering. By the same token, McCormack deconstructs the mind-body hierarchy; the body is the only means

through which desire and psychology are enacted. Andrew's monstrosity integrates body with mind in an inalienable whole.

The religious identity of the Scottish Halfnights remains murky. Clues are dropped, however, to indicate that the Halfnights are Presbyterians. Indeed the title of the novel is lifted from a politically motivated religious treatise published by John Knox, founder of Scottish Presbyterianism, in 1558. Knox's treatise is the shadowy double to McCormack's novel, especially in the Calvinistic condemnation of the flesh that McCormack parodies. While visiting his would-be lover Catherine Cleaves, Andrew, distracted by lust, notices the journal "*Presbyterian Lovefest Annual*" (168) on her book-shelves. The title satirizes the Presbyterian repression of pleasure, erotic or otherwise, that Knox advocated. The title also pokes fun at the infrequency of the lovefest, which occurs annually. McCormack's fascination with Knox can be traced to "Knox Abroad" in *Inspecting the Vaults*. In this fantasy narrative, John Knox in Canada imposes his austere religious convictions on fellow sailors and natives alike. "Knox Abroad" figures Knox as sadistic, even homicidal; he throws his infant sister into a pigs' trough and lets the pigs eat her alive. To allay carnal demons, he counsels "contempt of the flesh" and torturous rites of passage for young men, "pain being a valuable discipline" (*Inspecting the Vaults* 90). Denial of the body denies any and all pleasure.

Misogyny rules Knox's Presbyterian disdain for the body in his treatise *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*. A diatribe against women rulers, Knox's animadversion musters Biblical precedent and popular discourses about the inferiority of women to prove that "a woman promoted to sit in the seat of God [...] is a monstre in nature" (18). Knox also deploys discourses of the prodigious body to make his case. Troping on the civil body as "head" and "foot," and likening this to "natural" domestic arrangements, Knox argues that men should not obey women, just as "the head shuld not folowe the feet. But often it is, that we see the contrary, that he who in his ordre ought to be the head, doth not kepe the ordre of the feet (that is, doth not rule the feet) and that she, that is in place of the foote,

is constitute of the head" (23). Displacement of head and feet recalls those monsters with fish-tails and human torsos, or Adams and Eves writhing with serpents, that populate the imagination of Hieronymous Bosch and Lucas Cranach, as well as the prodigies with migrant body parts illustrated by Paré. Knox describes the body politic according to the discourse of monstrosity:

> who wolde not iudge that bodie to be a monstre, where there was no head eminent aboue the rest, but that the eyes were in the handes, the tonge and mouth beneth in the belie, and the eares in the feet. Men, I say, shulde not onlie pronounce this bodie to be a monstre: but assuredlie they might conclude that such a bodie coulde not long indure. And no lesse monstruous is the bodie of that common welth, where a woman beareth empire. (27)

Quite aside from Knox's representation of political fitness as a proportional arrangement of limbs and orifices, he genders monstrosity as female. Commonwealths, or households, are inevitably impure when headed by a woman.

Andrew Halfnight expresses a similar loathing of the female body in McCormack's novel. The adverse effect he has on women and the power women have to control him equally worry Andrew. His presence kills women, he thinks. His sister dies; his mother dies; his aunt dies. He blames himself indirectly for this sequence of misfortunes. His first love, Maria Hebblethwaite, disappears. Maria's mother despises Andrew and forbids him to consort with Maria. Typically, Andrew pursues obsessive women who abandon him. Catherine Cleaves drops him without consummating their romance. Andrew translates rejection into a judgment on his inadequacies as a romantic hero. In a different order of weirdness, his affair with Amber Tristesse is tinged with displaced incestuous desire; Andrew dreams that she has "a dark purple stain" from breast to navel "that was the mirror image of [his] own" (214). It also duplicates his sister's stain. The shadows of his mother

and his sister threaten his relations with all women. All such relations induce a failure of will or discernment in Andrew. Yet underlying this failure is a sense that women are to blame.

Presbyterian guilt reinforces Andrew's contempt for women's bodies. Because he cannot woo women successfully, and because he suffers from the self-denying strictures of Presbyterianism, Andrew repudiates women. When Andrew first sees Knox's treatise lying in a heap of other books, he reads only the title before dropping the book. Nevertheless, he pronounces it "the most frightening title of a book I'd ever seen" (57). Thinking that a regiment means something like a troupe, he has recurrent nightmares about green-eyed women dressed in black garments and marching in lock-step (123). His mother and his Aunt Lizzie have green eyes (7), and a propensity to stare ambiguously at Andrew. The nightmares manifest Andrew's fixation on death and his confusion around women who cast accusatory glances. The recurring nightmare recalls the funeral procession for his father which consisted entirely of women marching four abreast and wearing black. As Andrew watches the funeral procession from a window, his mother and aunt look up at him fiercely as if he were the instigator of his father's death: "their eyes glared like the eyes of wolves caught in headlights" (18). This is an interpolated memory. Andrew, only days old when his father dies, invents this scene from stories that Aunt Lizzie tells him. Death and accusation, however, become codes written into the gaze of the mother in early infancy.

The gaze, fetishized throughout *The First Blast of the Trumpet* in scenes of voyeurism, surveillance, and witnessing, is summed up by the Biblical inscription carved in the church in Andrew's home village: "AN EYE FOR AN EYE" (6). Looking exacts penalties, even blindness. In Andrew's nightmares, women carry pennants bearing illegible words (200–01). When his nightmare becomes more refined, he can read the motto on their banners: "THE MONSTROUS REGIMENT OF WOMEN" (236). Ironically, Andrew never reads Knox's treatise. He therefore misunderstands the meaning of the word "regiment." To Knox the word means "government" or "rule." Andrew interprets "regi-

ment" as "company" or "procession," until someone explains its gist to him (240). Belatedly, Andrew realizes he "might have been spared a lot of nightmares" (266) had he never clapped eyes on Knox's book. Even when he learns the real meaning of "regiment," his knowledge does not obviate his fears of women's bodies and women's sexuality. Knox's title confirms Andrew's anxieties and dread about women.

The nightmares that afflict Andrew invariably centre on his mother's body and his sense that femaleness entails sickness and irony. The gaze of his mother, duplicated in Aunt Lizzie's green-eyed stare, is an "ironic glint" (28) that both invites and repels Andrew's exploration of the sexualized maternal body. Always circumspect about his behaviour and what he tells, Andrew neglects to mention that he covertly gazes back at his mother, which he must do in order to see the "ironic glint" in her green eyes. This is a Lacanian mirror stage gone awry. The Medusa gaze of the mother abashes him and tacitly reveals his desire to touch the mother's body in a sexual, if not unwelcome, way. In Andrew's imagination the mother knows she is an object of sexualized love for her son. The mother always knows. Yet this is Andrew's narrative. He attributes irony to his mother's gaze. He wants her to know he has desires. Believing that watching is power, Andrew acquires power by being a watcher. The voyeurism that constitutes his erotic identity manifests itself in peek-a-boo glimpses of female bodies, as when he watches through a slit in a hotel door as a naval officer paints lizards onto a woman's skin. "I watched this, exactly as the man on the chair must have been watching" (36), Andrew says, confirming that masculine desire is rooted in mimicry and sly spectating. Notwithstanding knowledge gained from spying, Andrew is frightened by the "hard look" (93) of Lizzie. The knowing female gaze remains superior to the male glance. Andrew's gaze is rendered powerless when, watching from his bedroom window, he sees Lizzie strike her husband with a rock. Just before hitting him, "she turned and looked straight at the window. She saw me and gave me a smile" (95). The glance and smile make Andrew complicit in the crime insofar as he does nothing to prevent it. The gaze contains both erotic force and murderous meanness. Whatever adverse

effect Andrew imagines he has on women that causes them all to be deranged or to die when he is around, he displaces into a pervasive feeling of helplessness regarding women.

Andrew's fear of the feminine is particularly concentrated in fear of birth. Birth scenes appear throughout McCormack's oeuvre. A secret of paternity underlies *The Mysterium*. A woman, in a parody of birth in "Knox Abroad," is exorcized with biblical quotations and lashes of a whip until "her body convulsed, and, at last, the demon rushed out between her legs in a liquid gurgle" (*Inspecting the Vaults* 86). Most ghastly of all, the story of a surgeon who dismembers his wife and surgically implants parts of her body inside the bodies of his four children—a red-fingernailed hand inside one, a foot inside another—surfaces in several of McCormack's narratives. He tells the tale in "Sad Stories in Patagonia," then recycles it as the central premise of *The Paradise Motel* (13–19). A brief reprise of this gruesome narrative appears in *The First Blast of the Trumpet* (50–51). The dynamics of the story reverse the process of birth: children carry parts of their mother in their abdomens, then, by a second act of surgery, yield up their maternal cargo. The horror of birth can only be realized by acting out another quasi-birth in which offspring are penalized for being born. The surgeon, like numerous other doctors in McCormack's fiction, deliberates on illness and pathology; although few details are given about the surgeon aside from his profession, he inexplicably avenges himself by attacking the maternal body.

Andrew Halfnight's recurrent dreams of being swallowed up by a gaping, black chasm, and his identification of the black chasm with his mother, are counteracted by another dream-fantasy. In this fantasy, Andrew is absorbed, by an act of reverse birth, into the womb of an anonymous woman. He enters a motel room in the snowy Canadian wilderness. The nameless woman invites him to lie down. She coaxes Andrew's body—toes by feet by legs by torso by head—into her womb. Andrew relishes such fantasies about the obliteration of his body and consciousness. For instance, he imagines being swallowed by a tidal wave. He drowns, "choking in the green belly of the wave" (149). He

has a similar paranoid fantasy that the town where he was born slides into a "huge sink-hole" (197), erasing his entire past. The fantasy of being drawn inside the female body expresses a desire for annihilation, as do his fantasies of tidal waves and sink-holes. Return to the womb fulfils this sequence of obliterative delusions: "some instinct urged me to press my arms to my sides to facilitate entry, and so I did, for I was sliding faster now. I could have believed a rope was attached to me, I was being pulled inside so inexorably" (231). The umbilical rope linking him to the woman's womb makes Andrew's participation seem beyond his control, as if he had never left the maternal body, or as if he has reversed the terror of that body and wants to enter it in an act of surrender and violation. Female bodies allure and repulse him. To set himself free from this double bind, he surrenders to a maternal body.

This fantasy coincides with an automobile calamity that leaves Andrew unconscious. A near-death experience reverses the trauma of birth. Losing only an arm in the accident, Andrew comes to resemble his father, who likewise lost an arm in a driving accident. The fantasy thus recapitulates an oedipal desire to stand in for the father. The death of the mother, which imposes distance between mother's body and abandoned child, is overcome by this act of abjection in which the son nearly kills himself. The lost maternal body, in other words, can only be recovered through the compensatory, fantasized death of the oedipal son. "The earthly element of terror is the womb, the bodily grave, but it flowers with delight and a new life," Bakhtin claims (92). Fear of the maternal body is not a universal terror, as Bakhtin would have us believe.[4] Rather, it expresses a remaking of life from the point of origin—birth—that permits an incestuous abasement to the maternal. Andrew shares a terrified male perspective on female anatomy, yet gives himself over to fear in order to retrieve the lost mother. Julia Kristeva diagnoses this primal fantasy of loathing, a desperate nightmare that prevents objects of desire other than the mother from establishing themselves in psychic life, as "something *horrible to see* at the impossible doors of the invisible—the mother's body. The scene of scenes is here not the so-called primal scene but the one of giving birth, incest turned inside out,

flayed identity" (155). Kristeva suggests that birth, fantasy, and monstrosity are intimately linked. Andrew feels monstrous because he was born. His birth implicates him in a life he considers inherently sinful. His aberrant psychology, not the physical marking he bears, is the sure indication of his monstrosity.

The fantasy of reverse-birth conceals another latent fantasy: to return to the moment of conception, to know, from the instant that sperm enters egg, what fate marks Andrew's life. Even as he acts out the role of his father—he uses a photograph of his parents to reconstruct the events leading up to and culminating in his conception—the fantasy of being sucked into the womb requires Andrew to return to an originary moment for his identity. Going back to conception might correct Andrew's sense of monstrosity. At least it might explain his stain. It would also allow a full investigation of maternal desires. What was the mother thinking or feeling at the moment of conception? Did her state of mind affect the development of the foetus? Why was Andrew born a twin?

Discussing a surgeon's account of a short-lived prodigy born in Paris in 1696 with a single, cyclopean eye and an unfinished stubby nose jutting from the forehead, Alain Grosrichard points to a primitive fantasy about conception when he claims that "only the effects of the mother's imagination on her foetus can help us understand a monstrous birth of this kind" (119). Myths about conception would have us believe that a mother's predispositions and moods determine her child's character. In James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Molly Bloom conceives while watching two dogs copulating in the street, which results (her husband thinks) in the birth of a sickly, short-lived son (73). The spurious notion that maternal emotions or perverse desires manifest themselves in monstrous children had a long history in the Renaissance; children in the womb "are irrevocably marked with the damning seal of the imagination" of their mothers (Grosrichard 126). As in astrology, which is premised on the belief that personality and fate are fixed in the moment of birth, this fantasy of conception seals personality and fate at a moment nine months prior to birth. In this superstition, the mind of the mother gov-

erns the development of the child's body. Monstrous thoughts produce monstrous children.

In his discussion of the primal scene, at which a child sees, or imagines seeing, his parents copulate, Sigmund Freud does not take into account the child's fascination with conception as an answer to the bothersome question of where children come from. Focussing instead on the child's hysterical response to the mother's apparent absence of genitals and the seeming violence perpetrated on the mother's body by the father (276–79), Freud overlooks that the child fantasizes about his or her origins. *If mothers bear children and I am a child, I must have come from inside my mother's body.* A child's irrational fantasies of conception and gestation motivate the primal scene. These fantasies entail conjectures about moving from invisibility to visibility, being inside the maternal body, being separated from the maternal body, being imprinted with the mother's desires, doing violence to the mother's body at birth. Fantasies of conception answer the existential question of where babies come from; they also answer the problem of how babies function as both the tangible product of the mother's desires and the object of the mother's desires. The flow of desire between mother and child is stranger still. The child wants to satisfy the mother's desires and to impress his or her own desires on the mother. Just as Andrew Halfnight must bathe and dry his mother, the child fearfully maintains intimacy with the maternal body, source of unthinkable taboos that fabricate the secret identity of the child. Mothers, it turns out, are always monsters. So are children.

Andrew relates to the female body through repudiation. Because his mother recognizes his desires, he renounces them. He distrusts women and therefore rejects them. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler argues that repudiation underlies heterosexuality: "[a heterosexual man] wants the woman he would never be. He wouldn't be caught dead being her: therefore he wants her" (137). Butler maintains that, if heterosexuality requires the repudiation of certain attachments—the attachment to parents as love objects, or a man's attachment to another man—then "proper" masculine desire demands the repudiation

of feminine traits in the self. Desire must be rerouted to the external figure of the feminine in order to fulfill a heterosexual paradigm, but that desire is always tainted by the suspicion that the feminine is not trustworthy. Love, in this analysis, is always perverse because rooted in repudiation. As Andrew Halfnight says in the Prologue to *The First Blast of the Trumpet*, "*Never trust anyone you know well. You may love them. But you can't trust them*" (x). Nor are his final words in the novel, "LOVE and TRUST" (272), credible, since they assert goals that Andrew cannot achieve. Aunt Lizzie, as she is led from the courtroom after pleading guilty to murder, yells, "Love! Andrew! Love!" (117). Love is not in Andrew's repertory of emotions. Nor should he rely on murderous Lizzie as an advisor. Love would not release Andrew from desire, which is rooted in the body and therefore cannot be got rid of. If that is so, perhaps love itself should be renounced.

Having been blocked from an improper attachment to his mother, Andrew fails to redirect his desire elsewhere, and ends up thinking that all contact with women is doomed or dangerous. At the end of the novel, he rediscovers his long-lost love, Maria Hebblethwaite. They start a romance of sorts. Andrew thus revisits primary erotic situations, such as making love with Maria or reuniting with the mother's body. These primary events define the limits and expression of his desires. All women, he thinks, will reject him. All women can give or withhold affection. Belatedly, Andrew discovers that Doctor Giffen had an affair with his mother, that his mother was loved by another male without the child's knowledge. The doctor's kindness to Andrew, it turns out, is predicated on his love for Mrs. Halfnight; it has nothing to do with affection for Andrew himself. One of the primary influences on Andrew's erotic identity is therefore one he never knew about: that he was always part of a triangle, in which he was vying for attention that he would never receive. Sarah Halfnight's amorous life excludes Andrew. Stuck between a recognition of his mother's sexual drives and his repudiation of women's drives, Andrew succumbs to pleasure-avoiding pathology: "I took perverse sensual pleasure in my self-denial" (245). Returning to the motel where he was conceived, as he imagines he does, he introjects

himself into his parents' marriage, taking upon himself the father's, lover's, and voyeuristic child's roles simultaneously. He imagines taking a snapshot of the place where he was conceived (253). With his "withered left arm" (254) and hand like a "large claw" (245) that creepily wanders over his body as he sleeps, Andrew compounds the monstrosity that the "stain" confers on him. He becomes the monster he always felt himself to be.

Just as the midgets and automata in Robertson Davies's *A World of Wonders* mirror psychological monstrosities of so-called "normal" people, Andrew Halfnight in *The First Blast of the Trumpet* redefines monstrosity as an effect of maternal love and its denial. Indeed, Canadian literature has its fair share of physically deformed characters who suffer from similar lapses in familial or human affection, such as the midget and giantess in Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, the Canary family in Barbara Gowdy's *Mister Sandman*, or the queer red monster Geryon in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*. The monstrous is an opacity in understanding, not merely a physical blemish. Shifting and uncanny, the monstrous is a psychological effect that transforms over time. Although the monstrous can be displaced or repudiated, it always returns, like repressed knowledge or emotions that are looked at and looked over without ever being seen.

Notes

1 Stan Fogel points out Borgesian aspects of *Inspecting the Vaults*, such as McCormack's tendency to satirize scholarly *gravitas*: "like Borges, McCormack handles scholarly data to undermine their weight, their expertise" (143). Jamie Dopp diagnoses "anti-detective" or "metaphysical detective" elements in McCormack's plots that contradict rational certainty (94).

2 Montaigne discusses this phenomenon in "Of a Monstrous Child" (538-39). Stephen Pender details other early modern instances of irregularly developed twins (143-67).

3 McCormack teaches at the University of Waterloo. He received a Ph.D. at the University of Manitoba in 1966 with a thesis on Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Moher 107). Because McCormack's expertise is Renaissance lit-

erature, I have concentrated on monstrosity in that period and McCormack's transformations of Renaissance precedents.

4 Ruth Ginsburg, in a critique of Bakhtin's gender bias, points out that "for Bakhtin the mother's body is 'uncanny' in the Freudian sense. It is both terrifying and devoid of any frightening element" (172). Laughter strips the maternal body of terrifying signification.

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