Groundless Metaphors and Living Maps
in the Writing of Mary Shelley

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Mary Shelley's problematic relation to Romantic idealism has often been commented on. Mary Poovey has written of Mary Shelley's distrust of the imagination and the "fatal kinship between the human imagination, nature and death" in her work (Poovey, 257). Anne Mellor has discussed Shelley's critique of Percy Bysshe Shelley's idealist politics[i] and, more recently, Samantha Webb has considered the "critique in *The Last Man*... of those who would organize the social realm around the sign of their own authorship" and discussed the use of de-authorizing strategies in that novel (Webb, 131). Tilottama Rajan and Michael Rossington have proffered slightly more positive versions of Shelley's relation to idealism. Rajan has addressed the aspects of "virtuality" or "contingency" in *Valperga* where the idealism of the heroine, Euthanasia, is allowed to flourish in the imagination of the reader as opposed to the reality of history[ii] . Somewhat similarly Rossington sees Euthanasia "as a means through which the temporal world, both past and present, can be set apart, criticized and imaginatively overcome." (Rossington, 105) For both, however, Shelley's idealism is not allowed to flourish in the temporal or historical realm. Perhaps the wittiest appraisal of Shelley's anti-idealizing tendencies is given by Lee Sterrenburg in his comments on *The Last Man*: "She anticipates Thomas Carlyle in that she strives to close her Byron, her Shelley, and her Napoleon. But in contrast to Carlyle she has nothing to open in their place." (Sterrenburg, 343)

Shelley, as the quotation from Sterrenburg suggests, is a writer who must be seen in dialogic relation to her predecessors and contemporaries. In *Frankenstein* alone there are quotations from, amongst others, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Volney, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. *The Last Man* adds Byron to the roll-call and *Valperga*, as Rajan demonstrates, makes extensive reference to the "Godwinian theory of possibility" (Rajan, 89). Shelley's writing in relation to the works of her contemporaries might be said to tend towards the revisionist and sceptical; for Sterrenburg, it is characterized by a "radical pessimism" (Sterrenburg, 324). Shelley insistently revises, paying particular attention to Romantic writings of Nature - Wordsworth's, Coleridge's and Percy Bysshe Shelley's - the inscription of identity, the perceiving mind and the creative imagination. However, rather than being strictly

philosophical novels which air and consider different ideas, Shelley's texts - and in this article I will be looking at *Frankenstein*, *Valperga*, *The Last Man* and *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* - show a decided talent for mimicry. That is to say, Shelley not only entertains the ideas of her contemporaries but she does so in their own idiosyncratic languages. In this Mary Shelley could be described as a saboteuse, the undermining of the various languages of her contemporaries being a means to effect a kind of deconstruction of their idealisms.

The most radical aspect of Shelley's revisionism lies in her attitude to language. Shelley's "radical pessimism" extends to a distrust of writing itself, and in her works she mounts a sustained attack on the possibilities of figurative language. When she is not engaged in dialogic interplay with other Romantic idiolects Shelley's own preferred figuration is very different to that of any of her contemporaries. She displays a fondness for allegory, for mapping and for creating complex figures wherein the relation between the literal and the metaphorical becomes extremely problematic. At times her peculiar use of figurative language is tantamount to a self-deconstructive system, for over and over again her figures don't work.

The majority of this article will consider Shelley's highly peculiar use of figuration, examining its characteristic forms. My emphasis will be on the form rather than the content of the imagery, and I will be analyzing how the metaphor functions spatially. I will begin by considering her use of allegory, and the concomitant problems of figuring the self therein, then proceed to note the infection of the metaphorical in her work which technique sabotages the authority of her own figures, as literal and metaphorical levels infect each other. Following this will be a section in which I discuss the insistent deconstruction of nature as "ground" in Shelley's work. In the last section I will be considering some of the passages in Shelley's novels that elude the insistent idealisms, heroisms and Prometheanisms of their male protagonists and manage to project other visions and other spaces. Frankenstein's monster eludes narrative in the Arctic wastes; Lady Katherine and Perkin Warbeck have their moment on the waters. Significantly, these moments always seem to gesture beyond the narrative as Shelley's texts ask us to envisage that which is outside the text and beyond writing itself.

Allegories that don't work: Figuring the self in the Landscape

One of the most salient characteristics of Mary Shelley's use of figuration is her predilection for allegory. Allegory is rather an unusual choice of figure for Shelley because of its connection with the mediaeval and its lack of fluidity.   As M. H. Abrams points out, the "necessitarian implications" of the image of the Aeolian harp as "a construct for the mind in perception" (Abrams, 61) proved troublesome for Coleridge and other early Romantic writers. The relation between harp and breeze proves on the part of the harp to be rather static, and insufficiently interactive.   In Shelley's writing there seems to be a deliberate exploitation of these problems.   In particular she shows a proclivity to set up quasi-allegorical figures that just don't work, or, to consider the question another way, work negatively in the sophisticated attention they show towards language.

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The creation of self in terms of natural metaphor proves problematic in *Valperga* and *The Last Man*. In the latter the Byronic Raymond's attempt at figuring himself proves typically unsuccessful:

> 'What a sea is the tide of passion, whose fountains are in our
> own nature! Our virtues are the quick-sand, which shew
> themselves at calm and low water; but let the waves arise and
> the winds buffet them, and the poor devil whose hope was in
> their durability, finds them sink from under him. The
> fashions of the world, its exigencies, educations and pursuits,
> are winds to drive our wills, like clouds all one way; but let a
> thunderstorm arise in the shape of love, hate, or ambition, and
> the rack goes backward, stemming the opposing air in
> triumph.' (*The Last Man,* 46)

What is perhaps most interesting in this allegory of the self as the landscape is the impossibility of the equation: self is supposedly figured within the landscape of self; it is constructed as the "poor devil" at the mercy of his own landscape. Trying to trace the parallels the reader becomes lost for the self is simultaneously the sea and the drowning figure. The rage of the sea can only be understood in human terms which then renders useless the use of the metaphor of the sea for the human. The figure is disturbingly circular. Furthermore the "sea" is constructed as outside the self, but fed with water ("fountains") from

within. Cause and effect are confused. The fountains from self feed the sea, but the external world drowns the self. The very construction of this semi-allegory proves the impossibility of figuring self, as unified figure, in terms of the complexity of place. In the end, the scene has become multiple yet the figure of the drowner remains unrepresented - except through the reader's experience of Shelley's tortuous prose. Character is multiple, objectifed, and unfigured.

A passage from *Valperga*, describing the nature of the mind similarly creates a plural, ever-receding fragmented version of self within the landscape which is supposed to figure it. The heroine, Euthanasia, is telling Beatrice "what the human mind is" (*Valperga*, vol. III, p. 99) explaining, with a tacit allusion to Plato, that the soul is a cave and the "habitation of the madman" (*Valperga,* vol. III, p. 101) as well as of Poetry, Imagination, Heroism and Self-Sacrifice. Shelley's figure may be compared to Keats's celebrated image of "the Chamber of Maiden-Thought" [iii] Keats compares "human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe", exploiting the subtlety and suggestiveness of the image, rather than playing on allegorical correspondences. He describes the sensations of the perceiving self - "intoxicated with the light and atmosphere" - concentrating on the process of change, the "sharpening of vision"   In Keats's image all is in motion - the perceiving self moves through and is moved and changed; the passage easily moves between physical and abstract language; the prose is not bound by the image. Shelley's cave, on the other hand, is tenanted by a mixture of complex personifications and a list of abstractions seemingly too rich for the dingy dwelling.

> 'The human soul, dear girl, is a vast cave, in which many powers sit and live. First, Consciousness is as a centinel at the entrance; and near him wait Joy and Sorrow, Love and Hate all the quick sensations that through his means gain entrance into our hearts....   But beyond this there is an inner cave, difficult of access, rude, strange, and dangerous.
> Few visit this, and it is often barren and empty; but sometimes (like caverns that we read of, which are discovered in the bosoms of the mountains, and exist in beauty, unknown and neglected) this last recess is decorated with the strongest and most wondrous devices; - stalactites of surpassing beauty, stores of unimagined wealth, and silver sounds, which the dropping water makes, or the circulation of the air, felt among

the delicate crystals.' (*Valperga*, vol. III, p. 99-101)

Mental powers are depicted both as human figures and as the space in which they dwell: Consciousness is "as a centinel", but memory is a "vestibule cavern" wherein hope and fear are twin sisters.   Similarly, whereas Conscience is an owl hid from light of day, the expectations of allegory set up with relation to the other animals within are not fulfilled: the bats, vipers, and scorpions prove to be merely local colour. The inner cave too refuses to be read either as metaphor or in terms of the close allegorical relationships figured earlier. Instead, the latter part of this description hovers between a quasi-
"Kubla Khan"-ish descriptive fantasy and a continuation of the allegory featured earlier.

The allegorical mode is suspended at the moment when the narrative enters the inner cave, yet this is not because Shelley has forsaken the world of mediaeval allegory for a Coleridgean symbol. The passage is full of negations. The imagination is depicted in terms of "unimagined wealth", a phrase which seems to deny both the power of descriptive language and the power of the imagination. The self is walking through the inner cave - which is no longer itself. The inner cave posits an experiencing human figure hearing the synaesthetic "silver sounds". The delicately ambiguous positioning of "the circulation of the air felt among the delicate crystals" though it seems to suggest disembodied experience also implies a sensible human figure - which seems to be displaced allegory haunting its own mind. There is a strange involution which is the result of the whole being trapped within a part, which itself is an impossible, incompatible other world.

The passage seems to flaunt its unfetterable fluidity of mode as if to stress the impossibility of figuring or representing mind. I wish to stress that I am not just applying an unsympathetic practice of close reading that demands a suffocating logical coherence inimical to imaginative prose. I do not deny that this is an effective passage, but am suggesting that its power lies in the way that it transgresses the bounds of what it is claiming to do. In this passage perception and experience are dispersed through several elements of the image, obliterating the boundaries between them. It is not only that the "modes" of description Shelley uses - metaphor, allegory, symbolic description - are incompatible, or so random that space can either contain or figure abstraction, but also that the cave contains the human figure it is meant to depict and the abstractions must also be understood in terms of the human figures, ("centinels" etc.) that they are meant to define The passage preserves an

integrity as unrepresenting description. It seems to work by substituting the experiencing reader, wandering through collapsed figures, for the figured self within the text, which it has fractured beyond repair.

A further irony is suggested by the fact that by the end of the work Euthanasia, drowned, is herself resident of a cave " the oozy cavern of the ocean" (*Valperga*, vol. III p. 262) that is not contained by but contains her.

The passage from *Valperga* whilst it is intertextually related to Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is unlike it in that the latter draws boundaries and delineates space only to continue, and to dissolve - or merely leave behind - the boundaries. Shelley's image has no organic growth, which we may read to suggest the power of the creative process, or the unbindable strength of the symbol, or writing itself as symbolic process. Shelley stacks up levels of incompatible modes within a passage whose allegorical frame as it explicitly refers to the mind, soul and imagination then perversely denies the possibility of their figuration. There is no sense of growth, of movement which is the result of the impetus of the image - or vision - itself, nor of the blurring of boundaries with the possibility of transcendence that this might imply. Instead we have the deliberate use of an archaic figure pressed into impossible service; the mediaevalism of the allegory interpreted through a negated Romanticism.[iv]

Infection of the metaphorical

Shelley's images frequently function at a number of closely-related levels. An image from the literal present of the novel might simultaneously function as metaphor, and as metaphor within metaphor or the literal within the metaphor. Shelley's prose often features a dizzying transposition of inside and outside, of what influences what and what contains what. There is a complicated merging and even overlapping of the levels of literal and metaphorical within her texts. Her technique constantly denies the authority of her own figures, as literal and metaphorical levels infect each other, until both come toppling down.

In Shelley's novel *The Last Man* there is a bizarre passage where subject matter, image and place are all drawn together by means of the same figure: a practice which renders the several elements inseparable. Image cannot comment, or the use of figure inform, for each is imprisoned by the circularity of the metaphor. Perdita has left England, braved the seas and

finally arrived in Greece, where she hopes to find her love, Raymond. The passage describes
the release, or renewal, of her feelings.

> Were they the same waters of love, which, lately cold and cutting as ice, repelling as
> that, now loosened from their frozen chains, flowed through the regions of her soul in
> gushing and grateful exuberance?.. It was beginning life again; it was leaving
barren
> sands for an abode of fertile beauty; it was a harbour after a tempest, an opiate after
> sleepless nights, a happy waking from a terrible dream. (*The Last Man*, 121)

The image works on many levels. Perdita's emotion, the mapping of her love is traced
through a natural figure. The natural figure then flows back into, and is used to figure,
Perdita herself (and her cave-like soul).   What is more, the whole extended metaphor - of
leaving land, sailing and finding refuge - echoes the most recent events of plot. Shelley's
watery metaphors take place on the water. The harbour mentioned in the image is at once,
Perdita's love, her place with Raymond, and - at an astoundingly literal level - Piraeus.

Such a construction of metaphor functions in a way that creates of the text a self-sealed
system and induces a kind of readerly claustrophobia. The very proximity of the levels
hinders the metaphor's ability to highlight salient points of comparison. The phenomenon is
exemplified by the figure of the "living map", which could be described as the figure made
visible as figure. When Perdita and her brother Lionel journey to Raymond they climb
mountains only to experience a figure: "If we traversed a mountain, Greece, a living map,
was spread beneath" (*The Last Man*, 129).   There is a conditionality about experience itself;
Shelley cannot relinquish the "if". The passage is stuck at a mezzanine level which is neither
experience or figure, landscape, life or map. It is significant that seeing Greece as "a living
map" does not help Lionel Verney to understand the course of the battle that he observes
later.

Another "living map" effect, where the text is stranded (in more ways than one) between not
only figurative and literal, but also between different dimensions, occurs later when the
remnants of the English people arrive at Dover:

> "Death had hunted us through the course of many months, even to the narrow strip of

time on which we now stood;" (*The Last Man*, 271)

Abstract Death hunts through time. The English stand on time. This strip of time is Dover, where they await their crossing. Time is abstracted place where the real stand. It is Dover - where allegory, place, abstraction, figures and plot meet and stop.

These stylistic traits may be considered in relation to some of the conclusions Sophie Thomas draws in relation to *The Last Man*. For Thomas the isssue of the uncontainable is central to the novel. She finds "some infectiousness at play on the level of metaphor, as characters are ruined by ruins" (Thomas, 25) and argues "At issue in the novel, however, is not the boundless aspiration of the poetic imagination - the obvious province and provenance of the Romantic fragment - but boundlessness *as such*" (Thomas, 23).   Although, Thomas considers proliferation to characterize this text as its "paradoxical dynamic" (Thomas, 22) instead of the dead-end infectiousness I find, we both seem in accord as regards the anti-Romanticism implicit in Shelley's writing.

Nature - groundless metaphors

Shelley's use of dizzingly self-referential metaphors is akin to her habit of foregrounding the literary sources of the text. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley amongst many others are summoned up in her texts, but not integrated. In fact, Shelley often exploits the dialogic possibilities to the full, as different poets and philosophers are left to fight it out. *Frankenstein*, *The Last Man* and *Valperga* all contain passages that appeal to a Wordsworthian concept of nature, only to compromise it by foregrounding its contingency or relativity.   She refuses to allow the concept of Nature the status of "ground" in a Wordsworthian manner. Neither does she allow any kind of Percy Bysshe Shelley-like dialogue or interaction with nature - and to underscore her refusal Frankenstein experiences nature at its most unresponsive on Mont Blanc. In *Frankenstein* particularly we find conflicting versions of nature. Nature is appealed to as nurse, mother and guardian, but the dynamics of Shelley's plots ensure that it betrays any such expectations.

In all Mary Shelley's works the concept of nature is a problematic construction, used in connection with a range of impossible idealist projects, with ideologies of self, the inscription of identity and the perceiving mind, and the act of writing.   Her writing of a multiplicity of

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contradictory natures serves to raise expectations for - and then betray - some of these favourite Romantic projects. Frankenstein's aggressive seeking out of a healing nature is full of paradoxes. Its multiplied roles as healer, mother, sheer physical mass and "influence" not only conflict but also elide. Frankenstein becomes the object - child, patient - of a range of constructed and contradictory natures. He tries to identify (and loses) himself in a nature that isn't there. When at one point he refers to the atmosphere of the Alps in terms of "the solemn silence of this glorious presence-chamber of imperial nature" (*Frankenstein*, 360) nature becomes the space in which it should reveal itself, and, by this token, may not be revealed.

The narrative continues with a typically Wordsworthian appeal to an absent nature:

> These sublime and magnificent scenes... elevated me from all littleness of feeling... I retired to rest at night; my slumbers, as it were, waited on and ministered to by the assemblance of grand shapes which I had contemplated during the day. They congregated round me; (*Frankenstein*, 360)

In the first sentence Frankenstein as subject becomes object to nature's subject. However, as always in Shelley's prose the appeal to nature to affirm self-hood proves ill-fated. Nature and the self prop each other up as part of a mutually unsteady edifice. Whilst seeking ostensibly to reaffirm Frankenstein as subject through a Wordsworthian process of recollection in tranquillity the passage actually creates a phantom of him. The language of regality is transformed so that nature becomes a handmaiden, and, subject to nature's ministrations, Frankenstein's very subjectivity is threatened. The nature that ministers to him is phantom of his brain: his brain a passive recipient of a presence that is not there.

Even though nature in this passage is Frankenstein's construct, its physicality conjured up by poetic language, which has simultaneously denied its physical presence, nature yet makes an object of its writer - as pupil, child, wounded patient. So, when, in this delicate balance that purportedly seeks to affirm the transcendence and unity of nature and poet, nature disappears, so must the poet. Frankenstein, it appears, existed only in the tension produced by the unresolved question of presence and the active subject. Nature was conjured up as both subject and object to reinforce the perceiver. However, finally, neither nature nor Frankenstein can affirm the presence of the other, for each "half-creates" the other. The

relationship established is one not of mutual corroboration but an unsteady edifice without foundation in either.

Similar problems with the construction of nature occur in *Valperga* which Tilottama Rajan has called Shelley's "most darkly utopian romance" (Rajan, 89). The heroine, Euthanasia, describes her feeling for nature:

> "With my eyes I have spoken to the starry skies and the green earth; and with smiles
> that could not express my emotion I have conversed with the soft airs of summer, the
> murmur of streams and the chequered shades of our divine woods...
> "I have lived a solitary hermitess, and have become an enthusiast for all beauty.
Being
> alone, I have not feared to give reins to my feelings; I have lived within the universe
> of my own mind, and have often give reality to that which others called a dream."
> (*Valperga*, vol. I, p. 192)

Like Frankenstein's image of natural philosophy couched in terms of "chimeras of boundless grandeur" confronted with realities of "little worth" Euthanasia's unification with nature through speech "with... eyes" is here discussed in terms of the deliberate construction of "reality". Her deliberate 'giving' of reality reflects back onto the use of metaphors of place to construct the image of mind, and questions the formulation of her character which is poised in terms of an uneasy alliance between a dream-like nature and a mind pictured in terms of a universe whose reality is in question.

I am not attempting to over-simplify the relation of Wordsworth or Percy Bysshe Shelley to the issue of language, nor indeed, to deny the self-undoing of the rhetorical strategies as practised by these poets, or their deliberately problematic constructions of nature. Whilst acknowledging these strategies in the work of these poets - and Coleridge - I would argue that the deconstructive elements in these writers tend to very different ends. Isobel Armstrong argues that Romantic syntax is "fluid, coalescing, a syntax of transition" (Armstrong, 21) which "restructures its own elements and discovers ambiguous relationships as it forms" (Armstrong, 21) and that such a use of language can be read as conveying the "consciousness of the perceiver in external things, which must take place as process". (Armstrong, 14)...Wordsworth's language may be read as enacting the proliferation of

objects by the all-powerful perceiving mind (or poetry itself). The very moments at which the language seems most self-aware and problematic are also potentially those of the greatest creativity. Mary Shelley's conscious Wordsworthianism, on the other hand, seems rather to be an act of sabotage, for in her structures, literal and metaphorical levels infect each other until both come tumbling down.

Shelley renders nature unconstructable. As part of an unsteady edifice - or lean-to - it merely balances against the text's various thrusts towards different ideological positions. It is revealed as a changing construct, and perhaps nowhere more so than in Frankenstein's language of its domination where his attempts to "explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" (Frankenstein, 308) reveal themselves as a desperate attempt to re-figure an abstract nature in terms of its re-physicalization through metaphor. Nature has moved from the abstract laws of science back into a 'foldable' physicality. Rather than affirming Frankenstein's mastery, this movement draws attention to his attempts to use nature to justify his attempts at penetration and domination. In Frankenstein nature itself is finally absent and has been replaced by metaphor - and myth. It is an impossible base to figure on.

Frankenstein draws a parallel between studies of natural philosophy and the life of imagination: "'I was required to exchange chimeras of boundless grandeur for realities of little
worth.'" (Frankenstein, 306) However, the parallel is perhaps also a metaphor for nature and its actual figuration. The chimeras may be interpreted as the hopes of understanding nature, or the extensive face of nature constantly represented, or the metaphors which stand in for real nature which is chimerically non-present. As the physical nature of the text constantly recedes behind the use of nature as metaphor, so do the realities of little worth eventually prove to be unobtainable and become non-realities. Frankenstein deals instead with chimeras - the success of Frankenstein's alchemistic science, and of the manifold representations of nature. Figuring nature and using nature to figure, are exchangeable, equally chimerical activities, which are never realized as "realities" of any worth, for they are only mutually sustainable. Even the exchange from chimera to reality is couched in metaphorical terms.

With its pointed references to a number of contemporary poets Shelley's prose gestures to its own destabilizing of the boundaries between poetry and prose discourse.   One of the most

interesting and perplexing features about such self-deconstructing passages as those cited above is that whilst deconstructing the poetics of writers such as Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley they are in themselves examples of poetic prose. Shelley's prose flits in and out of the conventions of prose discourse; she writes poetic prose even as she challenges the poetics of the writers she most prefers. Her conscious and sophisticated destabilizing of the conventions of prose discourse is related to a larger concern with questions of genre in her work. At the most practical level her fusing of genre can be found in her interspersing of passages of biography with his poetry in her edition of Percy Bysshe Shelley's collected works. As Tilar J. Mazzeo points out in the introduction to Italian Lives Shelley's understanding of the parameters of biography as a genre is also experimental. (Italian Lives, xli) A novel such as The Last Man very obviously mixes biography and the novel, and as Sophie Thomas points out is also an exploration of the "fragment". Most notably experimental , however, are her self-consciously poetic novels which chafe against the confines not only of the poetic but also of the prosaic. Shelley's interest in the possiblities of formal combination, the blending of different modes is demonstrated again and again; she has a dynamic understanding of the possibilities of genre and the mileage to be gained in traversing the boundaries between genres. It is as if the exploration of the boundaries between subject and object, literal and metaphorical practised in her prose and more particularly in her use of figuration is echoed in her project of fusing genres. As a writer she is constantly testing limits.

There are many references to the act of writing throughout Shelley's works. The wholesale distrust of language that I find evinced in her fictional work is not to be found in her non-fictional works, and in fact, Shelley's musings on language and communication are sometimes positive. In May 1824 inspired by a ravine in Genoa, she enthuses "then I could think - and my imagination could invent and combine and self become absorbed in the grandeur of the universe I created" (Journals, 476) and can write, seemingly seamlessly, that she shall "pour forth my soul upon paper, feel the winged ideas arise, and enjoy the delight of expressing them" (Journals, 479). In general, Shelley's attitude to language is pragmatic in tone and shows a determination to see it as a tool. "Without a metaphor... I cannot live"[v]. Similarly she writes in December 1823 "I once dreamt that the thoughts labouring in this brain might shape themselves to such words as might weave a chain to bind the thought of my fellow creatures to me in love and sympathy - but it is not so" (Journals, 469). It is not only the failure of the proposition - and its relegation to fanciful dream - that is remarkable,

but also its very functionality: writing is to win Shelley friends. The image itself is also surprisingly ugly, ungainly and overly physically- drawn. In such a mood Shelley hacks apart the clumsily-forged connections between thought, word sympathy and love. The language is redolent of Frankenstein, the disassembling of the parts reminiscent of the dismantling of the female monster in that novel.

There are several interesting references in Shelley's Literary Lives which tally intriguingly well with the tendency to deconstruct writing itself that manifests itself in her novels. Deliberate infelicities permeate Shelley's description of the creative impulse in Literary Lives. In her life of Boccaccio she recounts the writer's visit to the tomb of Virgil. She writes of the "exceeding beauty of this scene" where the "whole of the bay of Naples opens itself to the eye", its "picturesque promontories" and "towering heights". Here "Nature presents her most enchanting aspect; and the voice of human genius breathing from the silent tomb, speaks of the influence of the imagination of man, and of the power which he possesses to communicate his ideas in all their warmth and beauty to his fellow creatures." (Italian Lives, 54) Such is Shelley's vision of the triumph of genius and the communicative powers of the imagination: it is not language which is communicating in this passage but "enchanting" nature, and the voice is coming from the tomb. The passage recalls The Last Man with its use of the image of the Sybil's cave, the construction of the landscape as a "living map" and the use of death as a figure by which to communicate. In the Spanish and Portugese Lives Shelley stresses that the period of Cervantes's great artistic creation began in a prison. (Spanish and Portugese Lives, 144-5) In her life of Rousseau she again confronts some of the discrepancies between nature, idealism, language and subjectivity, refusing to give a more organic description of the creative process and instead emphasizing its mechanics, as if constructing an equation: "Rousseau embellishes even the impure, by painting it in colours that hide its real nature; and imparts to the emotions of sense all the elevation and intensity of delicate and exalted passion." (French Lives, 366) Indeed Mary Shelley when discussing the dynamics of writing in relation to a number of authors tends to employ an ambiguous rhetoric which veers between mechanism and illusion. When she writes of Rousseau's reveries the language is that of illusion and sleight of hand; she revisits the image of the chimera and, in terms similar to those in the passage from Frankenstein quoted above, explores the relation between imagination, the absent object and the subjectivity of the writer: "his imagination fired, his heart swelled, his being became absorbed. No real object presenting itself he created chimerical beings, on whom he

exhausted the most passionate sentiments, the most brilliant imaginations." (French Lives, 341). Her account of Godwin's compostition processes in the unpublished Life presents a description of inspiration which is strangely mechanistic (and which one is tempted to associate with an attempt to call into question the underlying idealist thrust of Godwin's prose)[vi] .

Beyond Writing

Although at face value it might look as if I am pitting Shelley against her male contemporaries, positing a female pragmatism which sees itself as a corrective to Romantic male idealism, I do not subscribe to the idea that Romantic discourse is thus inevitably gendered. Neither, I think, did Shelley herself. Valperga's Beatrice is by no means her only example of an ill-fated female idealist. If anything Shelley's characteristic attitude, a result of both temperament and experience, seems to be anti-ideological and anti-idealistic rather than irredeemably gendered.

In contrast to the pessimism and pragmatism I've been stressing so far, I would like to finish this article by focussing on a passage in Shelley's Perkin Warbeck in which Shelley calls upon movement, "distance" and endlessness as opposed to narrative closure.

Michael Rossington has written of "Euthanasia's displacement of the temporal" (Rossington, 105) at the conclusion of Valperga in which the heroine sets sail on a boat that is never to be seen again. There is a passage in Perkin Warbeck (a text which, though it figures many sublime landscapes, ends in a garden) which features the "displacement of the temporal" in somewhat more optimistic form and conveys the sense of possibilities both within and without the text. As in Valperga the moment happens on the sea. Richard, Duke of York, and the Lady Katherine are in a skiff:

> It sufficed for their two full hearts that they were together on
> the dark wide sea; the bright sky above, and calm upon the
> bosom of the deep. (Perkin Warbeck, vol. III, p. 23)

Lady Katherine thinks:

"Oh, that for ever they might sail thus on the pathless, shoreless sea:" (Perkin

Warbeck, vol. III, p. 24)

I would like to suggest that the redundant foreclosure implied in her use of the image of the sea, can be read instead as opening and leading outside of the text. The image of the "pathless, shoreless sea" is very close to that of Frankenstein's monster setting off across the Arctic wastes into "darkness and distance" (Frankenstein, 497). There is, in both cases, a union of time and place - both unlimited. In this space and time, plot and closure do not exist; this unity is then the death of narrative, which it could be said to transcend.
A few pages earlier, Richard's life is described as:

> The noble object of godlike fidelity and the sad victim of
> demoniac treason: the mark of man's hate and woman's love:
> spending thus a short eventful life: It is not spent; he yet
> breathes: he is on the world of waters. (Perkin Warbeck, vol.
> III, p. 18)

It is at the moment when "spending" becomes "spent" in the context of a present tense that negates the historicity of the earlier part of the sentence, that Richard is imaged as "on the world of water". This moment is one again of unity; literally and metaphorically he is on "waters" and Richard steps from the past of the continuous narrative to a present "he yet breathes" which enters into the moment of reading - the "yet" of now. The "world of waters" is the place of uncertainty, atemporality and the continuous present where novelistic pre-destination does not exist and the author can eschew the closure that is plot leading to ending.

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Shelley's texts insistently and provocatively make figuration problematic. They also make nature an impossible base on which to figure: the very attempt to call upon nature as "ground" proves the artificiality and instability of the use of figuration and writing itself. Her novels again and again demonstrate that their existence is grounded not on this impossible metaphysical unity but in the space where figure and its signification uneasily collide: these are the dynamics of plot. Her "radical pessimism" and distrust of writing itself

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ultimately lead the reader to a place outside the text, the phantasized continuous present that is the "pathless, shoreless sea". Such are Mary Shelley's dynamics of plot and non-plot: the groaning of pessimism but also the possibility of "unimagined" plenitude.

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[i] see Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Feminism* and *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monster*s

[ii] see "Between Romance and History: Possibility and Contingency in Godwin, Leibniz, and Mary Shelley's *Valperga*" in Betty T. Bennett and Stuart Curran, (eds.) *Mary Shelley in her Times*

[iii] John Keats, *Letters of John Keats* ed. Robert Gittings. Letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3 May 1818, p. 95

[iv] A passage from Mary Shelley's journal of December 1834 revisits the image. Complaining that her "affections have been cruelly wounded" Shelley claims her imagination as her solace, referring directly to "Kubla Khan" as she does so. Her imagination, she states "is my treasure - my Kubla Khan - my Stately pleasure-ground through which a mighty river ran down to a sunless sea" (p. 543) In Shelley's version, however, the emphasis is on the "sunless sea" with a pitifully small amount of illumination provided by "my butterfuly winged dreams which flit about my mind". (p. 543) Quotations from *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844* ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert.

[v] Quoted in introduction to *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844* ed. Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert p. xx

[vi] Mary Shelley's *Literary Lives and Other Writings* ed. Nora Crook, Volume IV *Life of William Godwin* ed. Pamela Clemit and Arnold Markley, see, for example, p. 17 and p. 94