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BEYOND THE PICTURESQUE AND THE SUBLIME: MARY SHELLEY'S APPROACH TO NATURE IN THE NOVELS *FRANKENSTEIN* AND *LODORE*

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It is somewhat striking that Mary Shelley's moment of high personal creativity, the summer of 1816, should have coincided with a climatic catastrophe of world-wide proportions, the eruption of the Indonesian volcano Tambora.[1] One could be tempted to associate the ravages caused by the creature with the deaths provoked by the "year without a summer" in which *Frankenstein* was written. In fact, Mary Shelley's fiction – perhaps because of the climactic changes she witnessed – reveals a complex approach to the natural world that invites an ecocritical reading. This may be, however, this paper takes up Ralph Pite's invitation to re-contextualize any ecocritical approach by taking into consideration the complex approaches to nature, theoretical and practical, that were available to a nineteenth-century female writer. As he claims, "In order to have an ecological literature, we need to develop an ecological idea of reading both for history and for texts. For the Romantics to be green, we will need to read them in a green way" (359). As a woman who travelled extensively throughout Europe, Mary Shelley noted in her diaries and letters the changing landscape that caught her imagination. This article claims that these impressions played an important role in shaping her fiction. By focusing on two novels, *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Lodore* (1835), situated respectively at the beginning and at the end of her narrative production, this article will outline the evolution of Shelley's discourse on nature and the landscape.

The picturesque and the sublime in *Frankenstein*

The British Romantic approach to the natural world is dominated by a pictorial stance: poets and novelists often share with travel writers the search

1 On this subject see the study by Gillian D'Arcy Wood, *Tambora, The Eruption that Changed the World* (2014) (Kindle edition).

for the "picturesque", the beautiful and the sublime. Mary Shelley's works illustrate the limits of the aesthetic vocabulary of the sublime and the beautiful as well as advocating the return to a peaceful state that could be termed "pastoral". Mary Shelley's travel and fiction writing is inspired for its terminology by the two canonical approaches to landscape: Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) and William Gilpin's definitions of the picturesque in his *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (1772). This aspect of Shelley's approach to nature was also the driving force behind the Shelleys' tours in Europe and in particular in Switzerland in 1814 and 1816, recounted in *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*.[2]

In *Frankenstein*, the narrators' description of the power of the landscape is mediated by Shelley's own experience of her two visits to Mont Blanc, and by the characters' own attitude to the natural world. In fact, the two aspects cannot be separated because of the narrative structure of multiple intradiagetic narrators. The novel is characterised by a constant change of scenery that is subjected to multiple descriptions by the three peripatetic narrators. The explorer Walton, the student Frankenstein and his creature, share an incessant change of country that alternates in their descriptions between the sublime and the picturesque. While the landscape of the Swiss Alps is associated with the Burkean sublime, as was typical in nineteenth-century aesthetic theory from John Dennis (1657–1734)[3] onwards, the landscape of the Rhine Valley first and of Matlock (Derbyshire) and of the Lake District secondly, are described as being "picturesque". The central question asked here concerns the narrative function of these descriptions. The picturesque is invoked at a time of respite in Frankenstein's sufferings in which nature has purposely been chosen to revive his spirits after the deaths of William and Justine. As a good disciple of Gilpin, Frankenstein notes in his narrative the most significant "stations", or spots, and their picturesque richness:

2 Twentieth-century criticism has provided many contemporary readings of the Romantic sublime, from Thomas Weiskel's to Angela Leighton's to the more recent approaches by Philip Shaw and Timothy Costelloe.

3 See also Addison's Essays on the Pleasures of the Imagination, published in The Spectator, 412 (1712) and Mark Akenside's poem Pleasures of the Imagination (1744)

> The course of the Rhine below Mayence becomes much more *picturesque*. The river descends rapidly, and winds between hills, not high, but *steep*, and of *beautiful* forms. We saw many *ruined castles* standing on the edges of *precipices*, surrounded by black woods, *high and inaccessible*. This part of the Rhine, indeed, presents a singularly *variegated landscape*. In *one spot* you view *rugged hills, ruined castles overlooking tremenduous precipices*, with the dark Rhine *rushing beneath*; and, on the sudden turn of a promontory, flourishing vineyards, with green sloping banks, and a meandering river, and populous towns, occupy the scene. (106–7. My italics)

The description is marked by a switch to the present tense and the use of the third person, which introduces a "picture effect", one that is shared by a reader transformed into a spectator.[4] This effect can be ascribed to the figure of speech "hypotyposis" (Louvel). The "one spot" follows the traditional practice, introduced by Gilpin and his followers, of indicating select "stations" that enable the viewer to benefit from the enjoyment of a picturesque or beautiful scenery. The scene conforms to Gilpin's definitions for its unity of composition and for its "*roughness*" that "forms the most essential point of difference between the beautiful and the picturesque" (Gilpin, Essay I, "On Picturesque Beauty", 6). In his second "Essay on Picturesque Travel", Gilpin points out that the search for the picturesque is an intellectual activity, a "scientifical employment" (Gilpin, Essay II, "On Picturesque Travel", 49), in which the traveller recreates the landscape in his mind by applying his knowledge of paintings or prints of seventeenth-century landscape painting by Salvator Rosa or Claude Gelée, le Lorrain (1600–82). Frankenstein's description follows Gilpin's analysis as it is characterised by a cold detachment and abstraction. Frankenstein's complete domination of nature strikes one especially when compared to Clerval's. His description, introduced as direct speech, expresses his impression of the landscape through the language of sensibility and the passions, namely, through the use of adjectives and verbs that express a feeling, rather than a pictorial quality:

4 On Romantic visual culture, see John Barrell (1980), Peter Garside and Stephen Copley (1996) and Luisa Calé (2006).

> The mountains of Switzerland are *more majestic and strange*; but there is *a charm* in the banks of this *divine* river, that *I never before saw equalled*. […] Oh, surely, *the spirit that inhabits and guards this place has a soul* more in harmony with man, than those who pile the glacier, or retire to the inaccessible peaks of the mountains of our own country. (107, my italics)

For Clerval the landscape, rather than being an assembly of pleasing elements to be framed in the mind for future comparison with select paintings, is a living entity, endowed with a "soul" or "spirit" separate from the human mind and yet in harmony with it. Frankenstein/the narrator ascribes Clerval's attitude to a Wordsworthian belief in the need for reciprocity between man and nature, as established in the poem "Tintern Abbey":

> He was a being formed in the "very poetry of nature". […] The scenery of external nature, which others regard only with admiration, he loved with ardour:
>
> –'The sounding cataract
> Haunted *him* like a passion: the tall rock,
> The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
> Their colours and their forms, were then to him
> An appetite; a feeling, and a love,
> That had no need of a remoter charm,
> By thought supplied, or any interest
> Unborrowed from the eye.'
>
> And where does he now exist? Is this gentle and lovely being lost for ever? Has this mind so replete with ideas, imaginations fanciful and magnificient, which formed a world, whose existence depended on the life of its creator; has this mind perished? Does it now only exist in my memory? No, it is not thus, your form so divinely wrought, and beaming with beauty, has decayed, but your spirit still visits and consoles you unhappy friend. (108)

Shelley's juxtaposition of intertextual reference to Wordsworth and the narrator's prolepsis produce dramatic irony: Clerval's demise by the creature was not prevented by nature. Shelley here reverses the role nature has in Wordsworth's poetry: while for example in the poem "Nutting" nature

replies with mildness or utter passiveness to the poet's act of plunder, in *Frankenstein* nature becomes the plunderer in the form of the monster. This identification between the creature and nature has been suggested, for example, by Peter Brooks, "It is as if the Monster, generated within the sanctum of nature, at home in its most sublime settings, might himself represent the final secret of nature, its force of forces" (215–6). One can certainly claim that nature is a facilitator of the creature's project of destruction.

The picturesque descriptions in the novel thus have a double function: they create a respite in the build-up of tension, and they are contrasted with Clerval's Wordsworthian philosophy of nature. Yet, as will be shown, Frankenstein dominates the aesthetic discourse in the novel as he becomes the spokesperson of Burkean approaches to the sublime.

The sublime in *Frankenstein:* contrasting the Burkean and the material sublime

Paul A. Cantor identifies in *Frankenstein* "a protest against Romantic titanism, against the masculine aggressiveness that lies concealed beneath the dreams of Romantic idealism. […] a protest in the name of domesticity against the destructive effects of the Romantic heroic ideal" (89). While I do not disagree with Cantor, I believe Shelley's project in *Frankenstein* involves a different approach to sublime experience, one that constrasts the transcendent Romantic sublime with what has been identified as the "material sublime".

As John G. Pipkin has cogently pointed out, the absence of transcendental sublimity in Romantic women writers has prompted feminist critics to find alternative aesthetic discourses. Anne Mellor, in particular, has championed a "feminine sublime" by which women writers embrace a closer connection with the natural world that does not involve possessiveness or plunder. While this category does explain partly the gendered, male characterisation of the British discourse on the sublime and the exclusion of women writers, it does not apply to poets such as Charlotte Smith or Mary Tighe, or, indeed, to Mary Shelley. In fact, women writers did suggest an alternative sublime experience, one that rejects transcendence as a final solution to the threatening experience of the sublime. As Pipkin explains, in these instances "the transformative turn away from the feel-

ing of terror is paradoxically accompanied by a turn toward the material source of that same terror; these are the transformations encompassed by the material sublime" (601). Women writers may then conclude a sublime experience with feelings of commiseration or identification with the material world, resulting in a moment of personal defiance, empowerment, or self-realization" (601). However, the material sublime, far from being limited to women writers, was first named in Keats's poem "Epistle to J. H. Reynolds". For Keats, as Onno Oerlemans explains "the material sublime is in this instance not just a sense of awe and fear […] but a sudden recognition that it is possible to see at once how thought and existence are estranged from a clear awareness of the physical world, and that they are inexplicably rooted in it" (Oerlemans, Introduction). The material sublime thus often verges on the Gothic for its capacity to accept the "otherness" of the natural world and its threats to the subject.

Shelley's decision to set the most important events of the plot in extreme natural locations, Mount Blanc and the North Pole, invokes from the contemporary reader the expectation of the extreme feelings of "astonishment" ascribed by Edmund Burke to the sublime. In Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry* there is ambiguity and blurring between the feelings produced by the sublime, and the objective qualities capable of producing such feelings (darkness, vastness). Furthermore, in the attempt to locate the origin of the sublime experience in our senses (through passions) Burke emphasizes their delusionary nature. For example, in the discussion concerning "darkness", Burke refutes Locke's identification of superstition as the main origin of fear of the dark, and claims a more general, physiological or animal fear linked to the sense of danger: "for in utter darkness, it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of the objects that surround us […] we may fall down a precipice the first step we take" (130). More importantly, he confirms the narrative merit of associating the supernatural with darkness: "As to the association of ghosts and goblins; surely it is more natural to think, that darkness being originally an idea of terror, was chosen as a fit scene for such terrible representations" (130). I believe, here Burke makes an important contribution to explaining the rules of the uncanny in literature as he concedes that our emotions can be raised by "ideas [that] have never been at all presented to the senses of any men" (158).

Burke adds a section on "Words" to the second edition of *A Philosophical Enquiry*, which further increases the sense that the sublime is based on "indeterminacy", as exemplified by Milton's poetry. By quoting Milton's description of the travels of the fallen angels as "a universe of Death" Burke concludes that "we do not sufficiently distinguish, in our observations upon language, between a clear expression, and a strong expression […] the latter belongs to the passions" (159–160). Having done so, he sets the task of finding limits to the dangerous violence of emotions, but, according to Adam Phillips, "The text is riddled with images of sometimes punitive constriction […] – while Burke tries to impose strict laws and very narrow limits on the recalcitrant material of the passions, and of language itself" (xviii).

In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley exploits Burke's suggestions concerning "darkness" by setting the appearance of the creature within the natural sublime. While in his youth Frankenstein's feelings at the visit of the *Mer de glace* correspond to what Burke terms the "inferior effects" of the sublime, namely "admiration, reverence, and respect" (53), by comparison, the appearence of the creature is described in terms that correspond to Burke's definition of the sublime in nature and in real life. In fact for Burke the sublime, in Adam Phillips' words, "makes reasoning impossible and is the antithesis of philosophical enquiry because it is always in excess of any kind of limit or boundary" (xxi–xxii). These are the feelings described by Frankenstein; after astonishment and awe, he is overwhelmed by the creature and uses the language of indeterminancy employed by Burke:

> As I said this, I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with *superhuman* speed […]. I perceived, as the *shape* came nearer, (*sight tremenduous and abhorred*!) that it was the wretch whom I had created. (65)

The appearance of the creature, barely visible, seems to have been generated by the elements. The sublime landscape contributes to making the creature responsible for Frankenstein's feelings of terror and awe. In both passages, Shelley uses the word "shape" to describe the creature, thus invoking Milton's "death" cited in Burke's treatise as an example of "obscurity" (55). According to Burke, in Milton "in this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree" (55). However, the sub-

lime experience in Milton is partly redeemed by its didactic aim, as it is meant to incite the reader to accompany its terror of "death" with religious awe. In Shelley the reader partakes of Frankenstein's experience of terror and fear as he is forced to acknowledge the physical existence of his creature and the experience generated ends in despondency rather than awe thus turning the natural into material sublime.

It can also be noted that the material sublime merges into the Gothic by introducing other conventions of the genre, like the moon-lit environment, and in the appearance of the creature in the Orkneys (*Frankenstein*, 115**).** This association between Frankenstein's "vision" of the creature and the environmental *topoi* of Gothic horror, forces the reader into the uncertainty that characterises the pure fantastic, as noted by Nora Crook (68).[5] Thus, the sublime in Frankenstein collaborates with the Gothic project of the narrative: it becomes, in Lovejoy's definition, "a substitution of one for another way of conceiving of 'Nature'" (Lovejoy 164).

In *Lodore*, like in *Frankenstein*, sublime landscapes are evoked for their beneficial effect and the two novels share the same complex interrelationship between man and nature. Kate Ellison, for example, finds that the novel "could be called *Frankenstein* without the science" (230). In creating the Byronic character of Lodore, nature, namely the wilderness in Illinois, has the power of taming his ambitions and pride and leaves way to a Wordsworthian contemplation and Lodore becomes "contented with his lot" (*Lodore*, 59). This happiness is only temporary; at the first adversity, his choice is to "meet the trials" by returning to the English high society that had seen his demise. Nature seems to prevent this choice of Byronic plunge into action, and the overpowering feeling caused by the Niagara Falls threaten him into annihilation as Lodore contemplates suicide:

> One day, occupied by such thoughts, he stood watching the vast and celebrated cataract, whose everlasting and impetuous flow mirrored the dauntless but rash energy of his soul. A vague desire of plunging into the whirl

5 As Nora Crook explains, because of this uncertainty, one can consider "the novel an example of the 'pure-fantastic', to use the terminology of the formalist critic, Tzvetan Todorov. For Todorov, the 'pure-fantastic' is an inherently subversive genre, which, forcing the reader to hesitate irresolvably between alternative explanations, calls into question the nature of 'reality' itself" (Crook 68).

> of waters agitated him. His existence appeared to be a blot in the creation; his hopes, and fears, and resolves, a worthless web of ill-assorted ideas, best swept away at once from the creation. (147)

This ability to be overwhelmed by nature is thus another example of the material sublime in Shelley. Moreover, in *Lodore* while the male characters are threatened by nature, female characters are identified with it, as the creature in *Frankenstein*. In the episode quoted above Fanny Dernham's providential and almost supernatural appearance saves Lodore. Villiers, whose pride in refusing help is a lighter version of Lodore's Byronism, envisages a return to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's state of nature beyond and before "culture" and "property":

> "How false and senseless all this truly is!" he pursued. "Find a people who truly make earth, its woods and fells, and inclement sky, their unadorned dwelling-place, who pluck the spontaneous fruits of the soil, or slay the animals as they find them, attending neither to culture nor property, and we give them the name of barbarians and savages – untaught, uncivilized, miserable beings – and we, the wiser and more refined, hunt and exterminate them […]. *The more barriers we place between ourselves and nature, the more completely we cut ourselves off from her generous but simple munificence".* (282, my italics)

Men like Lodore or Villiers are the perpetrators of this division even when they are able to envisage an alternative viewpoint. Thus Villiers, while contemplating a society different from the one dominated by possession and economic status, cannot listen to Ethel's words about the existence of a different order of things in which man and nature belong to the same world:

> "But is this necessary?" asked the forest-bred girl: "when I lived in the wilds of Illinois – the simplest abode, food and attire, were all I knew of human refinements, and I was satisfied". Villiers did not appear to heed her remark. (282)

In *Lodore* Mary Shelley thus associates the division between man and the natural world, culture and nature, to a male experience. This dichotomy is at the origin of the male experience of the sublime: incapable of grasping the "otherness" of the natural world, male characters will either dominate it or transcend it by negating it. The introduction of the material sublime implies the failure of their project and the persistence of the "otherness" of nature. Moreover, by moving from the natural sublime to the wider cultural implication of the relationship between man/woman and nature Shelley circumvents the obstacles concerning women writers' struggle with the masculine aesthetic ideology of the transcendent sublime.

Beyond the picturesque and the sublime: Shelley's commitment to nature

Yet what is nature for Mary Shelley? It cannot be dismissed in its physical aspect of "landscape". As Timothy Morton points out, "'Nature' is a key Enlightenment and Romantic term, 'Nature' can be an abstract principle, an intrinsic value including a widening circle of beings: 'man', woman, child, slave, animal … plant? mineral?" (700). In Mary Shelley the term "nature" had progressed from the enlightment meaning, which referred to the universal characters of mankind as illustrated by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, to a more clearly identified lexical field, which dealt with the vegetal and animal species, or the countryside as opposed to the city.[6] While the picturesque and the sublime are intrinsically instrumental in Shelley's narrative project, in both *Frankenstein* and *Lodore* Shelley reveals a wholistic approach to the natural world compatible with a certain environmental commitment, which ranges from pictorial interest, to landscape gardening, to agriculture.

In *Frankenstein*, the respect for nature is illustrated by the idealised small Swiss communities represented by Victor's family and the De Laceys. Victor's family has chosen to reside mainly on a "*campagne*" on Belrive, "the eastern shore of the lake" where Elizabeth lives in "admiration and delight" of the scenery "the sublime shapes of the mountains, the changes

6 The *OED* devotes three pages to the different treatments of nature: "The material world, or its collective objects and phenomena, esp. those with which man is most directly in contact; freq. the features and products of the earth itself, as contrasted with those of human civilization". *OED*, XX, 247–50. The authors cited are Cowper (*Hope*), and Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Georgics*.

of the seasons, tempest and calm, the silence of the winter, and the life and turbulence of our Alpine summers" (*Frankenstein*, Chapter 2). As Elizabeth confirms, life is controlled by immutable laws: "The blue-lake and snow-clad mountains – they never change. And I think our placid home and contented hearts are regulated by the same immutable laws." As for the De Laceys, the creature states that "their food, as I afterwards found, was coarse, but it was wholesome; and they procured a sufficiency of it. Several new kinds of plants sprang up in the garden, which they dressed; and these signs of comfort increased daily as the season advanced" (*Frankenstein*, 110). Moreover, the creature is shown to be at ease with the elements that he is able to dominate: "The caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me, and the only one which man does not grudge" (146). As Carol J. Adams has pointed out, his declared vegetarianism is both a sign of community with nature and of his aspiration to be accepted by men (108–119). As Morton has pointed out "Frankenstein serves as a template for the nature debate. The creature is both utterly natural (made of pieces of other life forms) and unnatural" (700).

In *Frankenstein* Shelley contrasts this depiction of an ideal society in which man and nature are in harmony with Victor's Miltonic dream to learn "the secret of heaven and earth" (36). His dream is also fraught by his incapacity to partake his scientific enquiries with Elizabeth. He reproduces his family's sexual division of roles, in which women are docile and domestic companions.

In *Lodore* Shelley further develops the theme of the Garden of Eden with an ironic but clear attack on Milton's Eve as a model for female education. Lord Lodore "drew his chief ideas from Milton's Eve, and adding to this the romance of chivalry, he satisfied himself that his daughter would be the embodied ideal of all that is adorable and estimable in her sex" (65). The narrator is explicit in claiming that the aim is not to foster independence and thus keep Ethel in his own sphere of influence, if not "possession". However, the chief model invoked for the relationship between Lodore and the wilderness in Illinois is Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Recurrent epigraphs and citations equate Lodore to Prospero and Ethel to Miranda, like, for example, the incipit of Book I, Chapter 3:

Miranda. - Alack! What trouble
Was I then to you!
Prospero. - O, a cherubim
Thou wast, that did preserve me!
THE TEMPEST

> SUCH was the Englishman who had taken refuge in the furthest wilds of an almost untenanted portion of the globe. Like a Corinthian column, left single amidst the ruder forms of the forest oaks, standing in alien beauty, a type of civilization and the arts, *among the rougher, though perhaps no less valuable, growth of Nature's own*. (61, my italics)

The narrator here adheres to Lodore's colonial values and he is presented as the model of the civilized man subduing the coarse wilderness. Significantly, nature is here depicted in negative terms that suggest its imperfection in the absence of human intervention (*among the rougher, though perhaps no less valuable, growth of Nature's own*). As a new Robinson Crusoe, Lodore comes fully equipped with the practical skills in agriculture that he has been able to acquire during his travels around Europe: "When questioned he detailed practices in Poland and Hungary, and gave his reasons why he thought them applicable to the soil in question" (55). Despite his lack of formal education, he shines in comparison with the settlers who see him as a model of the cultivated English society from which he has excluded himself. The narrator presents him as the best representative of the old world, "a type of civilization and the arts". Yet, like in *Frankenstein*, Shelley introduces an ironic undertone that invites the reader to question the narrator's statements. For example, the narrator's supposed disparagement of the native Americans' knowledge is contradicted in Book III, where the internal focalisation highlights Ethel's superiority over her husband Villiers for her adaptability and practical skills, which she learnt from the Indians**:**

> The white inhabitants of America did not form her only school. The Red Indian, and his squaw were also human beings, subject to the same necessities, moved, in the first instance, by the same impulses as herself. All that bore the human form were sanctified to her by the spirit of sympathy; and she could not, as Edward did, feel herself wholly outcast and under ban, while kindness,

> however humble, and intelligence, however lowly, attended upon her. (374)

The frequent references to *The Tempest* are highly significant as an expression of a female writer's stance and as an expression of the myth of America. Shelley's focus on the figure of Miranda, according to Lisa Vargo, shows her attempt to create "a character who embodies the ideals of the domestic", one in which "Shelley is critical of how such figures embody male fantasies of feminine passivity" (31–2). This is also achieved by undermining the idea of the white settlers' superiority thus merging feminist and postcolonial approaches, all implicit in *The Tempest*, as contemporary postcolonial readings have shown (Ashcroft and Fielder).

The conclusion of the novel confirms Shelley's desire to introduce a wholistic approach to nature and society. As part III of the novel brings Cornelia into the center of the plot, the narrator celebrates her decision to sacrifice her entire source of income for her daughter as the epitomy of a woman's contentement:

> She walked back to her little garden and stooped to gather some fresh violets, and to prop a drooping jonquil heavy with its burthen of sweet blooms. She inhaled the vernal odours with rapture. "Yes," she thought, "nature is the refuge and home for women: they have no public career — no aim nor end beyond their domestic circle; but they can extend that, and make all the creations of nature their own, to foster and do good […]. It is better to love, to be of use to one of these flowers, than to be admired of the many — the mere puppet of one's own vanity". (442–3)

By changing her focus from male to female ambition, Mary Shelley is able in *Lodore* to express a positive message that has universal import. The cultivation of the garden, the Medieval topos of the "Hortus Conclusus", or enclosed garden, does not result in a renunciation and isolation of women from society; rather it places them into a wider context that matters more than "the niggard rules of society, which gives us only the drawing-room or ball-room" (442). As has been demonstrated, Cornelia's return to nature also implies a return to her domestic duties towards her daughter.

Well before the recent spur of ecocriticism, Mary Poovey pointed out the originality of Shelley's approach to the natural world:

> Mary Shelley also distrusts nature, for, far from curbing the imagination, nature simply encourages imaginative projection. Essentially, Mary Shelley's understanding of nature coincides with those of Wordsworth, Wollstonecraft, and Percy Shelley. But where these three trust the imagination to disarm the natural world of its meaninglessness by projecting human content into it, Mary Shelley's anxiety about the imagination bleeds into the world it invades. (Poovey 126)

Poovey's analysis would still hold were it not for the oversimplification of three authors whose natural vision we would now perceive as being quite discordant. Should we consider Mary Shelley's approach to nature as close to Shelley's "deep ecology" (Pite) or, to Wordsworth's more complex ideology of nature's educational role, or to Mary Woolstonecraft's more scientific approach steeped in her readings of natural history? (Ruston) I believe Shelley's works reveal her implication in the main contemporary debates relating to the natural world. McKusik has identified in *The Last Man* "an insight that constitutes the conceptual core of modern ecological thought". The complex approach to nature in *Frankenstein* and *Lodore* reveals a desire to break the taboo of the male transcendental sublime by showing the dark side of human nature when divorced from its feminine half, as the myth of Plato's *Symposium* taught Shelley. Moreover, Shelley's vision of the relationship between man in nature and man and nature in *Lodore* and *Frankenstein* evolves into a personal awareness of the way in which nature can help women overcome the limits of patriarchal society – by eroding the confines between the domestic and the natural world – that can be termed "ecofeminist".

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