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"Nature is the nurse of sentiment": The solitary wanderer in Shelley's Frankenstein and Wollstonecraft's Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark

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In Mary Wollstonecraft's 1796 *Letters Written During a Short Residence,* and in her daughter Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein*, nature is presented as a refuge, a balm to ease the suffering of tortured characters. Consumed by grief after the death of his younger brother, Victor Frankenstein contemplates 'the palaces of nature', and declares that, 'By degrees the calm and heavenly scene restored me'.[1] Similarly, Wollstonecraft's narrator explains to the reader that she has to interrupt her writing because she, 'must trip up the rocks. The rain is over. Let me catch pleasure on the wing--- I may be melancholy tomorrow. Now all my nerves keep time with the melody of nature'.[2] In this way, nature is presented by both authors as a conduit to emotion, sentimentality and sensibility.

Sensibility, as the 'understanding of or ability to decide about what is good or valuable, especially in connection with artistic or social activities', was inextricably linked to eighteenth century philosophies of human understanding, and contemporary judgements on moral character.[3] This definition becomes complicated when we apply the term to Shelley's creature, whose 'spirits were elevated by the enchanting appearance of nature' (p.114), yet is seen by the world as an 'abhorred monster' (p.97). Indeed, in both texts sensibility and emotions are closely linked, as the rational thoughts of multiple narrators threaten to be overwhelmed by 'paroxysms of anguish and despair' (FRK, p.188). These excesses of emotion intertwine with the sublime landscapes in which they occur in and, crucially, centre around the figure of the solitary wanderer. This figure is governed by the 'romantic impulse',

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[1] All quotations are from: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus,* (London: Penguin, 2012), 1818 Edition, p.68.
[2] All quotations are from: Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, (Fontwell: Centaur Press Ltd, 1970), p.129.
[3] *Sensibility,* n. *Cambridge English Dictionary.*

and is, as Wollstonecraft writes in the advertisement for *A Short Residence*, ‘the little hero of each tale’ (p.vi).[4]

In this vein, both narratives privilege the Rousseauian influence of man’s ‘affectations’.[5] Rousseau writes in his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* that, ‘moral instinct has ever conducted me right’, and that ‘my conscience has ever maintained its primitive integrity’.[6] We see this viewpoint at work in Shelley and in Wollstonecraft as characters make mistakes, or are portrayed as morally lacking, when they ignore their conscience and emotional instincts. For example, in *Frankenstein* when Victor allows Justine to be hanged for the crime of William’s murder. Or in *A Short Residence,* the constant criticism of the absent, unnamed but addressed figure of Gilbert Imlay for his prioritisation of capitalism and mercantile trade over love.

In *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature,* Onno Oerlemans and Katherine Rankin explain the need to catalogue the beauty of nature as: ‘the desire to reproduce an experience of the material through an analogous experience with language.’[7] This process of describing and reproducing a visceral experience of the senses operates in *Frankenstein* and *A Short Residence* as a therapeutic exercise to distract the characters’ from the ‘impetuous tide’ (SR, p.95) of their emotions. Indeed, in *Frankenstein,* in Victor’s first portion of the narrative, he only starts to describe and find solace in nature after the traumatic event of the creature’s birth. Before this, as Fredricks points out in her essay ‘On the Sublime and Beautiful in Shelley’s Frankenstein’, ‘Victor Frankenstein is not interested in the aesthetic

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[4] Onno Oerlemans and Katherine Neilson Rankin, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature,* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004), p.10.
[5] James O’Rourke, ‘“Nothing More Unnatural”: Mary Shelley’s Revision of Rousseau’, *ELH*, 56:3, (1989), p.549.
[6] Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of J.J Rousseau, Part One, To which are added, The Reveries of a solitary walker, Translated from the French,* Vol.2, Third Edition, (London: G.G and Robinson 1796), p.243.
[7] Oerlemans and Ranklin, *Materiality of Nature,* p.21.

“aspect” of nature; he searches for causes and effects and longs to appropriate its secrets for the “benefit” of man’.[8] But, I would argue that once he starts to recover from his ‘nervous fever’, he starts to truly appreciate nature. The first thing he relates when he begins to become himself again is that ‘the fallen leaves had disappeared and that the young buds were shooting forth from the trees’, modulating quickly from his all-consuming melancholy to declare, ‘It was a divine spring; and the season contributed greatly to my convalescence. I felt also sentiments of joy and affection revive in my bosom; my gloom disappeared’ (p.55).

As Victor's despair increases, so does his reliance on nature. When he is confined to his family home after Justine’s unjust execution, tormented by guilt, Victor passionately admits that: ‘the whirlwind passions of my soul drove me to seek, by bodily exercise and by change of place, some relief from my intolerable sensations’ (p.91). It is not just any movement that he craves, but specifically solitary movement within nature, as Shelley illustrates with the phrase, ‘I suddenly left my home, and bending my steps towards the near Alpine valleys, sought in the magnificence, the eternity of such scenes, to forget myself and my ephemeral, because human sorrows’ (p.91). The spontaneity, romantic setting and pilgrim-like status of the traveller categorise this journey as a solitary wander, or reverie amongst nature. The purpose is emotional, and unplanned, and the background reflects the turbulent feelings of the individual, making almost seem as if the landscape was crafted solely to compliment the character’s journey.

In *A Short Residence,* the narrator’s/Wollstonecraft’s emotions affect her perception of the natural world, and ‘worldly cares melt into the stuff that dreams are made of’ (p.25) whilst she is contemplating nature. But nature’s own movements and elements are not affected by human cares. In her description of the Danish coastline, the different aspects of the

[8] Mary Fredricks, ‘‘On the Sublime and Beautiful in Shelley’s *Frankenstein’*, *Essays in Literature,* 23:2 (1996),p.185.

environment are alive and constantly interact with each other, separate from the solitary wanderer who is just an onlooker to the eternity of the natural world. For example, in Letter I she describes the shore which she took refuge on during her passage to Gothenburg. 'There was a solemn silence in this scene, which made itself be felt. The sun-beams that played on the ocean, scarcely ruffled by the lightest breeze, contrasted with the huge, dark rocks, that looked like the rude materials of creation forming the barrier of unwrought space, forcibly struck me' (p.5).

Here the wanderer is connected to, but not at the centre of the scene. But later on in the narrative, the narrator gets more absorbed in the 'agony' that 'gave a poignancy' to her 'sensations' (p.15), and fancy increasingly decides the direction of her reveries. Julia Ellison defines fancy as, 'subjectivity that is at once ungrounded- liberated from or deprived of territory- and mobile, committed to ambitious itineraries through international space and historical time'.[9] This ungrounded subjectivity is what makes the narrative of *A Short Residence* so fascinating, as it is when Wollstonecraft strays from 'the straight road of observation' (214), that her reveries become more mythical, emotional and connected to nature.

For example, in letter IX, the narrator cherishes the 'fresh odour' that 'reanimated me in the avenue', of trees compared to the 'damp chilliness of the apartments' (p.109). Once outside, underneath the 'august pines', she can think clearly again and is inspired by 'a mystic kind of reverence' (p.109). The style is so descriptive and present in the moment despite the narrative use of past tense, that the reader almost forgets that this is a reflection of past events. Indeed, we read her reverie among the pines as colloquial and conversational:

[9] Julia Ellison, *Cato's Tear and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p.100; quoted in Mary A. Farvet, '*Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark: travelling with Mary Wollstonecraft',* in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft,* ed. by Claudia L. Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.216.

‘philosophers seemed to inhabit them--- ever musing; I could scarcely conceive that they were without some consciousness of existence--- without a calm enjoyment of the pleasure they diffused’ (pp.109-110). The dashes and semicolon highlight the imaginative leaps her mind makes, and create a restless, ever moving effect within the narrative.[10] As Farvet writes, the narrative of *A Short Residence*, is ultimately, ‘a continual travel out of the self and back again, as if travel for Wollstonecraft required the repeated dislocation of the self, and travel writing the recognition of that pain’.[11]

This compulsion for wandering, the ‘active principle’ (p.90), that permeates Wollstonecraft’s and Shelley’s work has its roots in Rousseauian autonomy. It hinges upon the idea that every individual has a basic human right to prioritise their self-knowledge, explore the complexities of their emotions and enjoy ‘the charm of contemplation’.[12] In Shelley’s introduction to the 1831 edition of Frankenstein, she explains the story of the novel’s creation, and in doing so crafts an image of herself as a solitary romantic wanderer inspired by nature. She writes of her excursions to visit family in the wilderness of northern Scotland:

> my habitual residence was on the bank and dreary northern shores of the Tay, near Dundee. Blank and dreary on retrospection I call them, they were not so to me then. They were the aerie of freedom and the pleasant region where unheeded I could commune with the creatures of my fancy.[13]

Interestingly, Shelley describes the landscape as ‘dreary’ in hindsight, but in the moment of inspiration the epic landscape fuelled her literary growth. Indeed, she writes that her, ‘true

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[10] Farvet, ‘*travelling with Mary Wollstonecraft’,* p.215.
[11] *Ibid,* p.225.
[12] Rousseau, *Reveries*, p.279.
[13] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus.* 1831 Edition. (New York: New American Library, 1983), p.viii; quoted in Fredricks, ‘On the Sublime and Beautiful’, p.183.

compositions', the 'airy flights of my imaginations', 'were born and fostered 'on the 'bleak sides of woodless mountains'.[14] It is clear that Shelley is deliberately emphasising the remoteness of the landscape to conjure the image for the readers of herself as a writer alone among awe inspiring nature.

Landscapes that are remote, striking and or barren are scattered through *Frankenstein* and *A Short Residence*. The landscapes can be described as sublime, which Thomas Weskel defines as nature which, 'determines the mind to regard its inability to grasp wholly the object as a symbol of the mind's relation to a transcendent order'.[15] This description is apt for the swiss mountains that Victor traverses, as when he is plunging deeper into the ravine of the Arve the narrative voice describes:

> The immense mountains and precipices that overhung me on either side- the sound of the river raging among the rocks, and the dashing of the waterfalls around, spoke of a power mighty as Omnipotence- and I ceased to fear, or to bend before any being less almighty than that which had created and ruled the elements, here displayed in their most terrific guises. (pp.91-92).

In the passages, the commas and dash work similarly to punctuation in Wollstonecraft's prose, foregrounding the mental leap from nature to a spiritual plane of thinking. Shelley deliberately chooses this 'sublime' setting for Victor's confrontation with the creature. Indeed, every other confrontation between the pair also happens in a sublime yet awful setting: in the bare west coast of Scotland and finally in the wastes of the artic. Fredricks explains this

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[14] *Ibid.*
[15] Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.23; quoted in Oerlemans and Ranklin, *Materiality of Nature,* p.4.

by theorising that, 'the sublime settings in the text provide a space where the marginalised can be heard'.[16]

In both *Frankenstein* and in *A Short Residence,* sublime landscapes can comfort the tortured soul more effectively than simply beautiful or picturesque settings, because their awesomeness reflects the conflicting emotions of the wanderer. In *Frankenstein*, when Victor and Henry Clerval travel through the Rhine valley to sail to England, it is Henry who delights in the picturesque, 'flourishing vineyards with green banks', and the 'meandering river and populous towns' which occupied the scene (p.158). He passionately speculates, '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' (159). Here, Shelley is still connecting to a version of the sublime, using the presence of spirits in Clerval's imagination. But she presents him as able to appreciate the beauty of the landscape because of 'the sensibility of his heart' (159), and stable, optimistic disposition. Victor on the other hand, is 'pleased' by the landscape, but is still 'depressed in mind', with 'spirits continually agitated by gloomy feelings' (p.158). He finds tranquillity in the scene not from looking at the 'foliage' or the 'divine river', but from lying 'at the bottom of the boat (p.158). He relievedly confesses that, 'as I gazed on the cloudless blue sky, I seemed to drink in a tranquillity to which I had long been a stranger' (p.158). It is the emptiness and vastness of the sky that consoles him, not the richness of the valley that is teeming with life.

Similarly, in *A Short Residence*, the narrator prefers the 'wild grandeur' (p.56) of the Norwegian and western Swedish countryside to that which is tamer further south towards Denmark. On the way to the ferry with separates Norway and Sweden she describes:

[16] Fredricks, 'On the Sublime and Beautiful', p.178.

> Entering amongst the cliffs, we were sheltered from the wind; warm sunbeams began to play, steams to flow, and groves of pines diversified the rocks. Sometimes they became bare and sublime. Once in particular, after mounting the most terrific precipice, we had to pass through a tremendous defile, where the closing chasm seemed to threaten us with instant destruction, when turning quickly, verdant meadows and a beautiful lake relieved and charmed my eyes. (p.56).

Here, it is clear that the sublime and the terrific go hand in hand for Wollstonecraft, and she gets pleasure from the tremendous cliffs. Fredricks comments that, 'Wollstonecraft is less interested in the tender emotions of "moderate felicity" associated with contemplation of the beautiful than she is in the sublime feeling of "respect"'.[17] However, the beautiful still makes an appearance in this scene, and indeed it is relieving and charming for Wollstonecraft after the bareness of the cliffs. Therefore, I would argue that it is the contrast between that the sublime and the beautiful that stimulates Wollstonecraft. This links back to the 'active principle' (p.90), as the need for contrast in the landscape is another form of stimulation for the restless wanderer.

In *Frankenstein,* nature can be changeable and volatile, just like both Victor and the creature's emotions. In the valley of Chamonix, although the scenery assumes 'a more magnificent and astonishing character' the closer Victor gets to the glacier at Montanvert, the 'pleasure' it bestows is relaxing and like a balm to his nerves: 'The very winds whispered in soothing accents, and maternal nature bade me weep no more' (p.92). Nature here is comforting and feminine. In contrast, when Victor is returning to Geneva after William's death, nature erupts into a dramatic storm. Shelley's descriptive language here is vivid and visceral, and rooted in the senses: 'the thunder burst with a terrific crash over my head', 'vivid flashes of lightening dazzled my eyes, illuminating the lake, making it appear like a

[17] Fredricks, 'On the Sublime and Beautiful', p.180.

vast sheet of fire; then for an instant every thing seemed of a pitchy darkness, until the eye recovered itself from the preceding flash' (p.69). This tumultuous scene reflects Victor's grief, in the narrative and in Victor's sentiment, as he romanticises the storm, saying, 'This noble war in the sky elevated my spirits; I clasped my hands and exclaimed aloud, 'William, dear angel! this is thy funeral, this thy dirge!' (pp.69-70). The drama of the storm is an outlet for Victor's hyperbolic emotions and creates narrative excitement as well as soothing his grief.

In both texts, however, nature isn't always able to soothe the wounds of the suffering. The creature is able to appreciate the charms of nature, but they are often not enough to assuage the terrible 'anguish' (p.136) inside him. After the confrontation with the De Lacey's and the creature's eviction from his hovel next to the cottage, he ranges unhinged through the woods, consumed in 'fearful howling' (p.136). Nature is detached from his suffering: 'the cold stars shone in mockery, and the bare trees waved their branches above me: now and then the sweet voice of a bird burst forth amidst the universal stillness' (p.136). Instead of a comforting presence, nature has become the enemy in the creature's mind, because he feels separate and divided from it due to his monstrous passions. In the following lines, Shelley crafts the creature's voice to echo Satan in *Paradise Lost*: 'All, save I, were at rest or in enjoyment: I, like the archfiend, bore a hell within, and finding myself unsympathised with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat down and enjoyed the ruin' (p.136). Ironically, in this violent exclamation the reader experiences the extreme humanity of the creature, because it is his emotions and desire for companionship that fuel this uncontrollable passion. The creature is still a solitary, romantic wanderer but instead of a Wordsworthian figure at peace with nature he has become the tortured soul consumed with passion, wandering without purpose in a desolate landscape.

In *A Short Residence,* it is excessive melancholy, not anger, that nature is sometimes unable to soothe. Wollstonecraft writes that:

> Nature is the nurse of sentiment, --- the true source of taste; --- yet what misery, as well as rapture, is produced by a quick perception of the beautiful and sublime, when it is exercised in observing animated nature, when every beauteous feeling and emotion excites responsive sympathy, and the harmonized soul sinks into melancholy’ (p.71).

Unlike the creature, here the narrator’s melancholy is in harmony with nature. But she warns, ‘how dangerous it is to foster these sentiments in such an imperfect state of existence’ (p.71). Nature is capable of enhancing one’s emotions and sensations, but the cruel and imperfect world which injures and isolates is, from the solitary wanderer’s perspective, an incongruous setting for this heightened sensibility. Indeed, in a later letter the narrator complains that:

> The satisfaction arising from a conscious rectitude, will not calm an injured heart, when tenderness is ever finding excuses; and self-applause is a cold solitary feeling, that cannot supply the place of disappointed affection, without throwing a gloom over every prospect, which, banishing pleasure, does not exclude pain. (pp.142-143).

Subliminal contemplation then, when the soul is too consumed and wearied by emotion can aggravate rather than soothe the solitary wanderer’s mind. But even if the wanderer is sometimes beyond being soothed by nature, movement through it is still necessary, to try and escape the overwhelming emotion. After the above passage, Wollstonecraft writes that, ‘I reasoned and reasoned; but my heart was too full to allow me to remain in the house, and I walked, till I was wearied out, to purchase rest- or rather forgetfulness’ (p.143). The narrator does not describe any of the nature she sees on this walk, because she is in a state where she is unable to do so, but still she walks, guided by the restless ‘active principle’ (p.90). Farvet writes that, as the narrative of *A Short Residence* continues, ‘We begin to

understand the traveller's flights less as examples of freedom and more as efforts to escape, and therefore testaments to the constraints under which she operates'.[18]

Considering these emotional constraints that Wollstonecraft operated under, it is all the more remarkable that she produced a work so open to and perceptive of 'the embraces of nature' (SR, p.61). *Frankenstein*, also, is celebrated for its gothic, phycological and political overtones. But moving, affected descriptions of nature and its emotional powers permeate the text, working in tandem with the novel's political and social messages. O'Rourke writes that in *Frankenstein,* Shelley 'created characters whose psychologies were inextricable mixtures of altruism and narcissism'.[19] My argument is that these characteristics make them into the perfect solitary wanderers, as they are consumed by emotion yet have the sensibility to appreciate how the charms of nature can attempt to assuage their self-centred suffering.

So, in both texts, nature is both a source of emotion and sentiment, and a remedy for the suffering caused by the human world, which is portrayed as often cruel and unfeeling. In contrast, nature is sometimes aloof, sublime or untouchable, but it is never petty or vindictive, and is always present as a much needed escape for individuals who feel that they are 'destined to wander alone' (SR, p.142).

[18] Farvet, '*travelling with Mary Wollstonecraft',* p.215.
[19] O'Rourke, '"Nothing More Unnatural", p.556.

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