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Immortality or Monstrosity? Reflections on the Sublime in Romantic Literature and Art

In "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison", Samuel Coleridge takes his readers on a guided tour through the three neoclassical landscape categories of the picturesque, the beautiful and the sublime, in order to demonstrate the limitations of a purely formal, aesthetic response to nature. In so doing, as I have argued at length elsewhere,[1] Coleridge went beyond Burke's and Kant's concepts of the sublime. He developed a new concept of the sublime as a mode of symbolic perception, an experience of psychological unity between the self and the other, which he poetically figured in the embracing flight of the lowly rook which joins man and nature and the life-force of the universe. In this essay, I shall explore the ways in which Coleridge's concept of the sublime was tested by Wordsworth in his "Immortality Ode" and by J.M.W. Turner and Caspar David Friedrich in their landscape paintings, but then forcefully rejected by Mary Shelley.

In the opening stanzas of his "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood"[2] Wordsworth places us in an explicitly "beautiful" landscape, a conventional pastoral setting of fresh green valleys, meadows and hills gently undulating to the blue sea, illumined by the rising sun of the May morning – or by rainbows, moonlight, or sparkling stars. Children gather gaily-colored flowers, shepherds call their flocks, birds sing, lambs bound "as to the tabors' sound". Such scenes were frequently depicted by the acknowledged Master of the Beautiful in Landscape, Claude Lorrain, as well as by his English disciple, Richard Wilson; see, for examples, Claude's *A Pastoral*

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1 Anne K. Mellor: "Coleridge's 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' and the Categories of English Landscape." In: *Studies in Romanticism* XVIII (1979): 253-70, Plates 1-2.

2 William Wordsworth: "Ode". In: *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983), 269-77. All further citations from this definitive *The Cornell Wordsworth* edition of the poem, subsequently titled "Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections in Early Childhood", will be given in the text by line.

Landscape [figure 64] or Wilson's *Dinas Bran, near Llangollen* [figure 81]. Both these paintings and Wordsworth's pastoral setting conform to the concept of the beautiful defined by Edmund Burke in his famous *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Grounding his aesthetic theory on a psychology of pleasure and pain, Burke argued that man's most pleasurable sensations are derived from the affirmation and protection of human life. Hence, those "qualities in things which induce in us a sense of affection and tenderness" and which arouse our sexual instinct to procreation are beautiful. Burke went on to identify the qualities of the beautiful as smoothness, gradual variation and flowing lines, smallness, delicacy, and "clean and fair" colors in their "milder" shades.[3] Wordsworth explicitly identifies the starlit waters around him as "beautiful and fair" (l. 15) and invokes the delicacy of the rose and rainbow, the fresh colors of spring flowers and green fields and early morning light, and the flowing, undulating lines of "a thousand valleys far and wide" (l. 47).

But even as Wordsworth celebrates the life-affirming, procreative ritual of Maying in a beautiful landscape, he has a profound sense of something that is missing. I'd like to suggest that what is missing is the sublime, the sublime as Wordsworth, guided by Coleridge, had come to understand it. In "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison", originally published by Coleridge in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), the collection he composed with Wordsworth, Coleridge had radically revised Burke's and Kant's concepts of the sublime. Burke had characterized the sublime as a response to a powerful idea of pain or possible threat to one's life, when one also knows that one is not in real danger. As Burke wrote,

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger; that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (47)

Burke then defined the typical qualities of the sublime landscape as a greatness of dimension that gives rise to an idea of infinity; obscurity (which blurs the definition of boundaries); profound darkness or intense light; and hence dark or intensely bright colors and sudden, sharp angles. Confronted with such overwhelming objects as the Alps, huge dark caves, a blinding sunset, or a towering gloomy ruin, the human mind first experiences terror or fear and then – as our instinct of self-preservation is gradually relaxed – astonishment,

3 Edmund Burke: *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757; repr. Philadelphia: S. F. Bradford, 1806), 176. All further references to this edition with be cited in the text.

admiration, reverence and respect. Thus, Burke concluded, from the aesthetic contemplation of a sublime landscape, one is led to a sensible impression of the Deity by whose power such magnificent scenes are created. Kant, however, in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of Judgment*), had defined the sublime experience as one in which the mind or reason (*Vernunft*) successfully detaches itself from participation in the phenomenological world and in this act of transcendental contemplation, achieves intellectual mastery over the power of nature. Although Kant denies Burke's claim that the experience of the sublime is necessarily accompanied by fear or terror, Kant's effort to establish a triumphant, solitary transcendental ego is dangerously undermined, as Frances Ferguson has argued, by its own isolation from a human community or the realm of affective feeling.[4] In opposition to both Burke and Kant, Coleridge in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" redefined the psychological experience of sublimity. Coleridge's experience of a sublime sunset was attended, not by fear or terror, but by a "deep joy". This joy grew from his apprehension of a landscape "less gross than bodily" and a single divine power flowing simultaneously through man, nature and God.

To find a visual analogue for the mode of sublime vision described by Coleridge, one must go beyond the overtly Burkean sublime landscapes of Salvator Rosa, Philippe de Loutherbourg, or Joseph Wright of Derby (e.g. *Sunset on the Coast near Naples* [figure 83]) to the late paintings of Caspar David Friedrich and J.M.W. Turner. Friedrich first invokes the Kantian image of the isolated spectator confronting and mastering the awesome infinity of nature, as in his *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (*Traveller Looking over a Sea of Fog*) [figure 54], or the Burkean image of the overwhelming power of a destructive nature, in *Das Eismeer* (*Arctic Shipwreck*) [figure 51]. But he mediates these images of sublime desolation and human isolation by introducing the figure of the crucifix into nature, as in *Kreuz an der Ostsee* (*Cross by the Baltic*) [figure 44] or *Kreuz im Gebirge (The Cross in the Mountains – 'Tetschen Altar'*) [figure 53]; the presence of the crucified Christ signifies both human mortality and immortality, the possibility of resurrection within the eternal cycles of nature.[5] In Das große Gehege bei *Dresden (The Large Enclosure near Dresden*) [figure 46], Friedrich achieves the same representation

4 Frances Ferguson: "The Sublime of Edmund Burke, or the Bathos of Experience." In: *Glyph* VIII (1981): 66-75; "Legislating the Sublime." In: *Studies in Eighteenth-Century British Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Ralph Cohen (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985): 128-47.

5 On Friedrich's debt to Kant, Burke and the concept of the sublime, see William Vaughan: *German Romantic Painting* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), Chapters 4-5; William Vaughan, Helmut Borscht-Supan, and Hans Joachim Neidhardt: *Caspar David Friedrich 1774-1840 – Romantic Landscape Painting in Dresden* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1972), 9-44; 69-93.

of "deep joy" that Coleridge articulated in "This Lime-Tree Bower", creating an image in which the viewer participates in the undulating, infinitely expanding glory of nature. Friedrich achieves this representation by refusing to frame his landscape. The atectonic curvature of the marshland in the foreground which sinks around and below the frame, together with the sweep of blue sky beyond the frame to right and left, create the illusion of an environment that embraces the spectator. By placing the eye of the viewer above the landscape, as though on a bridge, Friedrich subtly creates in the viewer the feeling of simultaneous possession and absorption. The viewer is drawn into a landscape that is simultaneously local and infinite, in which he or she feels securely in control, both empowered and liberated.

In his late paintings, Turner consistently glorifies the divine power of sunlight both to create the universe (by making it visible) and to annihilate it with an excess of light that blinds the viewer. In *Sun Setting over a Lake* [figure 79], the light of Turner's setting sun so irradiates and dominates the sea and sky that all natural, human and man-made objects are rendered "less gross than bodily". Here all outlines are blurred; even the line of the horizon is lost in the flood of golden-red color emanating from the sun. Turner thus visualized Burke's concept of sublime obscurity and infinity – which are created when "Extreme light, by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness" (117). But Turner's poetic vision of light and color, like Coleridge's, is accompanied by reverence and intense joy.

That Wordsworth mourns the loss of such a joyous, sublime experience at the beginning of his "Immortality Ode" is suggested by his emphasis on a missing radiance; it is the absence of a "celestial light, / The glory and the freshness of a dream", that he laments. In the Fenwick notes to the poem, Wordsworth explicitly associates this childhood vision of "dream-like vividness and splendour" with an experience of fusion between the self and the other:

> I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality.[6]

The experience for which Wordsworth yearns closely resembles the sublime experience Coleridge described in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison": an

6 Headnote to "Ode. Intimations of Immortality" by Isabella Fenwick, reprinted in *The Complete Poetical Works of Wordsworth* (The Cambridge Edition – Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932), 353.

experience of joyful fusion with a landscape that has become "less gross than bodily", a communion bathed in and irradiated by a glorious, even "celestial" light.

It is important to see here that for Wordsworth, as for Coleridge, the sublime and the beautiful are no longer categories of landscape, but modes of seeing and feeling. Both in his notes to *Descriptive Sketches* (1793), and in his later remarks on the sublime intended for inclusion in his *Guide to the Lakes*, Wordsworth insisted that the sublime is a subjective experience, not a set of objective qualities.[7] But Wordsworth disagreed with Coleridge on one point. Wordsworth insisted that the experience of the sublime could be aroused only by *distinct* forms which conveyed an impression of power and duration.[8] And, as Theresa Kelley has recently argued, Wordsworth explicitly identified the sublime mode of seeing with childhood.[9] As he wrote in his essay on the sublime,

> [...] it cannot be doubted that a child or an unpracticed person whose mind is possessed by the sight of a lofty precipice with its attire of hanging rocks and starting trees, &c., has been visited by a sense of sublimity if personal fear and surprise or wonder have not been carried beyond certain bounds. For whatever suspends the comparing powers of the mind and possesses it with a feeling or image of intense unity without a conscious contemplation of parts has produced that state of mind which is the consummation of the sublime [...][10]

Wordsworth then asserts that this sublime experience of "intense unity" with nature can come about in two ways. Either the power of the sublime can arouse the mind to an energetic attempt to expand itself to a point where it can "feed upon infinity", and thus leads the mind to "participate"[11] or become part of the force which acts upon it. Or the self-conscious mind can be so overwhelmed by the power of the sublime that it effectively loses self-awareness

7 Maureen Gillespie Andrews (ed.): *William Wordsworth's "The Sublime in Landscape": Text and Critical Edition* (Ann Arbor, University Microfilms, 1972), 32-35; cf. also 125 (cited hereafter as: "The Sublime in Landscape").

8 "The Sublime in Landscape", 114.

9 Theresa M. Kelley: *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 13-42. Although my remarks on Wordsworth's concept of the sublime as an experience associated with childhood and its relevance to the "Immortality Ode" were written long before I read Theresa Kelley's book, for presentation to the MLA Wordsworth-Coleridge Association meeting in December, 1980, they can be regarded as an extended footnote to Kelley's insightful and persuasive discussion of the sublime and the beautiful in Wordsworth's poetry. However, since Kelley rightly focuses on *The Prelude*, she gives only a passing comment on the "Immortality Ode" (157-8).

10 "The Sublime in Landscape", 118; cf. 112.

11 This is Wordsworth's word, 119.

in pure "contemplation of the might in the external power".[12] Thomas Weiskel has described these two modes of sublime experience as respectively, the positive or metaphorical sublime – in which the mind substitutes its own discourse for absent meaning – and the negative or metonymical sublime, in which the individual mind is negated and becomes but an infinitesimal part of an excess of meaning.[13] But in both modes, according to Wordsworth, the mind is led to an experience of participation in awesome, immeasurable and enduring power.

In a letter to his sister Dorothy written from Switzerland in September, 1790, Wordsworth explicitly contrasted this experience of the sublime to the experience of the beautiful. Comparing his response to Lake Como with his earlier response to the Alps, he commented:

> It was impossible not to contrast that repose, that complacency of Spirit, produced by these lovely scenes, with the sensations I had experienced two or three days before, in passing the alps. At the lake of Como my mind ran thro a thousand dreams of happiness which might be enjoyed upon its banks, if heightened by conversation and the exercise of the social affections. Among the more awful scenes of the Alps, I had not thought of man, or a single created being; my whole soul was turned to him who produced the terrible majesty before me.[14]

For Wordsworth, the beautiful is associated with a sense of self-satisfaction or personal well-being, with human love and social sympathy. But the sublime involves a suspension of *self*-consciousness, a fusion with infinite and eternal power.

Wordsworth's linking of "social affections" with a typically beautiful landscape and of "terrible majesty" with a sublime landscape, together with his repeated emphasis on the subjectivity of these experiences, suggests that he was responding to the more far-reaching psychological implications of Burke's aesthetic categories. In his psycho-historical study of Burke's life and works, *The Rage of Edmund Burke*, Isaac Kramnick has persuasively argued that Burke conceptualized the beautiful and the sublime in explicitly gendered terms. The sublime is masculine; the beautiful is feminine. The sublime has for Burke the qualities he associated with his powerful, demanding, violent, unloving father: it is vast, dark and gloomy; "great, rugged and negligent"; "solid and ever massive"; awesome in its infinite power; capable of arousing fear, terror and abject admiration. In contrast, the beautiful is associated with Burke's gentle, shy, devoted mother: it is "small", "smooth and polished", "light and delicate", gently undulating, regular. As Kramnick summarizes, the beautiful is for Burke "clean and fair, delicate and fragile, weak and timid, graceful, sweet, elegant, soft, relaxed, and enervated."[15] It produces in the beholder only feelings of affection and tenderness, a nurturant sense of well-being. Burke's essay on *The Sublime and the Beautiful* can therefore be read as a re-enactment of the Freudian family romance. The aesthete who can fully appreciate both the beautiful and the sublime has psychologically embraced the female/mother and triumphed over the castrating fear aroused by the powerful male/father.

These gender-identifications of the sublime as the awesome, threatening male/father and the beautiful as the protecting, nurturant female/mother point up the psychological dimensions of Wordsworth's presentation of the sublime and the beautiful in the "Immortality Ode." Here too the Oedipal romance is re-enacted. The male child initially feels a sublime experience of "intense unity" with omnipotent power. He is his environment; his ego is boundless. He is the father, creating and controlling a "celestial" world in which he loves and totally possesses his mother/nature. He is living in "the glory and the dream"; he is playing out the universal male childhood fantasy in which the child becomes the father and alone creates the "dream of human life". Explicitly identified by Wordsworth as the "best Philosopher", a "mighty Prophet" and a "Seer blest", this fantasizing child fully participates in the process of divine creation. In another sense than Wordsworth's epigraph for the Ode is usually taken, "The child is father of the man." At this level of Oedipal desire, the male child replaces his father. He usurps his father's role, authority, powers and even vision: he plays "with light upon him from his father's eyes". Moreover, he becomes the sole recipient of his mother's love: he is "fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses". Above all, he feels omnipotent: he experiences a "heaven-born freedom" and an immortality that "broods" over him as Milton's God broods over the abyss. The male child's fantasy of total power and completely satisfied desire, of sublime unity with divinity itself, is here realized in "dream-like vividness and splendour".

But this fantasy of sublime omnipotence is undermined as the child becomes ever more aware of his limited physical capacities and the "inevitable yoke" of social roles and obligations that deny his egotistical desire. Even though the beautiful mother is still there – "The Moon doth with delight/ Look round her when the heavens are bare" – the growing boy feels increas-

12 "The Sublime in Landscape", 119.

13 Thomas Weiskel: *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), 28-33 and passim.

14 Ernest de Selincourt (ed.): *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years*, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 34.

15 Isaac Kramnick: *The Rage of Edmund Burke – Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 95; cf. 93-8.

ingly insecure; his power and vision seem to fade.[16] Impotent, his creative powers apparently castrated, the youth feels dispossessed, cut off from his rightful heritage, a mere prisoner in his parents' home. Having been denied sublime and absolute possession of the mother and of nature, the boy feels increasingly ambivalent towards the mother, towards nature. He both despises and loves her; she becomes a "homely Nurse" who cares for yet imprisons her (perhaps only adopted) "foster-child".

Wordsworth's sixth stanza explicitly invokes the Oedipal plot. As a child, Oedipus was abandoned on the mountain-side; deprived of his birth-rights, lands and "imperial palace"; and raised by foster-parents. Like Oedipus – and like the protagonists of the Greek pastoral romances whose conventional plot Wordsworth is also retelling – this child is destined to regain his paternal heritage. Wordsworth's child here changes Oedipal tragedy into comic romance and Burke's sublime fear into Coleridge's sublime joy. Without guilt, he will return to the "imperial palace", replace his father, possess his mother, and know again "the glories he has known".

For Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" fully re-enacts the Oedipal family romance. The child becomes the father he has already been, restored by memory to the experience of the sublime. He regains his childhood consciousness of divine creative power. Like Adam in paradise, he moves once more in worlds "not realized", completely under his mental control. Having trembled "like a guilty thing surprised" before God-the-father, as Adam did when he ate the apple and gained the father's knowledge of good and evil, the rebellious son has finally overcome the guilt associated with his mortal nature, his incestuous desire. He now revives and affirms his "high instincts", his conviction that, having once experienced a sublime and "heaven-born freedom", he participates in divine creative power. As a child he obstinately questioned the reality-principle that denied his creative authority and immortality, his sublime unity with his created environment, his oneness with wall and tree: As a man, he gives thanks for the knowledge that, if he could once live such a dream of power, he is capable of living it again. Through memory and imagination, he can re-experience the sublime, can know again that paradise from which God-the-father had expelled him and claim it as his own.

16 Richard Onorato (*The Character of the Poet – Wordsworth in "The Prelude"* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971], 173-86) has emphasized Wordsworth's successful early resolution of the Oedipal conflict, a resolution that was undone by the traumatic death of Wordsworth's mother when the poet was eight years old and the subsequent effective disappearance of his father (who died when Wordsworth was 13). Thus it may be significant that the child depicted in the "Immortality Ode" is only six years old.

Within that paradise regained, the child-become-the-father repossesses the mother, those "first affections" that uphold and cherish him forever. Since as a child he experienced total oneness with his mother and nature, since he participated in a powerful love that united the self and the other, the child-become-man *knows* that he has the *capacity* to love and be loved. The Oedipal conflict is thus consciously resolved: the boy becomes the man who is capable of loving women and procreating children.

At the aesthetic level this leads to an intense appreciation of *both* the sublime and the beautiful. For Wordsworth, aesthetic and emotional pleasure can be derived from the "meanest flower that blows". The philosophic mind that is fully conscious of its participation in sublime power, joined with the primal sympathy that maternally responds to human suffering – this fusion of the male and the female, the sublime and the beautiful – can find aesthetic delight and psychological harmony in the contemplation of every natural object. The flower that blows – both opening its petals in the wind and losing those petals as they die – becomes, like Coleridge's homely rook at the end of "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison", a symbol of the communion the poet once again feels with a divine life-force, those "mighty waters rolling evermore". This flower thus images both the creative process of nature in which man sublimely participates and the fragile beauty to which he affectionately and compassionately responds with "thoughts too deep for tears".

And this flower is appropriately set in a pastoral landscape of "Fountains, Meadows, Hills and Groves" that is now lit by the sublime radiance of a "setting sun". The darker hues, the "sober coloring" of the sublime palette, are here laid upon explicitly beautiful forms. For a visual analogue to Wordsworth's mode of combining a beautiful pastoral landscape with the golden glow of a sublime sunset that preserves rather than blurs the distinct outlines of even the meanest flower, we might look to a painting by Francis Danby done in 1825, *Sunset through a Ruined Abbey* [figure 38]. Here the setting sun-light throws into sharp relief every detail of this landscape which deliberately combines the ruins and towering rocks of the sublime with the undulating curves (along the lake-edge and among the massed trees) of the beautiful. Or, for a second visual example of the Wordsworthian pastoral sublime, we could choose an earlier painting by Turner, *Petworth Park: Tillington Church in the Distance* [figure 75]. Here the celestial radiance and infinite spatial extension of the sublime sunset serves to highlight the individual forms of tree, deer, dogs and – standing closest to the divine energy source of the sun – the master of the domain. In his similar fusion of the sublime and the beautiful, Wordsworth moves beyond the anxiety-provoking divisions and frustrations of the Oedipal family romance to become the *Pater Familias*,

the triumphant winner of the palm, the man who has made his own soul and founded his own lineal race. The child becomes the man who consciously knows – and can practically realize – what he before experienced only in fantasy. He knows that he "participates" in the sublime, that he is part of the divine creative process that engenders nature and children alike.

Ten years later, Mary Shelley could see clearly the danger inherent in Wordsworth's affirmation of a human appropriation of sublime creative power. In *Frankenstein*, she showed what happens when a mortal man tries to usurp the powers of both the sublime and the beautiful, tries to be both father and mother, tries in effect to have a baby without a woman. Victor Frankenstein's attempt to create a new species or race out of dead animal and human parts, to be the God-like father of an immortal being, represents Wordsworth's and Coleridge's attempts to fuse with and possess the divine creative power of the universe. Because Victor Frankenstein is unable to mother the child he creates, because he fails to take parental responsibility for his new generation, he creates a monster capable of destroying not only himself but everyone he loves. Denied the female and human companionship he craves, Frankenstein's creature becomes violent, murderous, vengeful. As this gigantic creation tells his maker, "Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; – obey!"[17]

In his giant stature and life-threatening gestures, Frankenstein's creature embodies sublime terror and fear. Appropriately, he inhabits those very landscapes which Burke had identified as the sources of the sublime experience, the Swiss Alps, the Scottish coast, the North Pole. Frankenstein first speaks to his creature on the Mer de Glace above Chamonix, as thunder bursts over his head and lightning flashes. The creature then follows him to an equally desolate and life-threatening landscape, one of the Orkney islands off the coast of Scotland which is described as no more than "a rock, whose high sides were continually beaten upon by the waves" (161). The creature is last seen among "the mountainous ices of the ocean" at the North Pole, in that frozen wasteland pictured by Friedrich in *Arctic Shipwreck* [figure 51], the very locus of the Burkean sublime in landscape.

Moreover, the creature himself embodies the human sublime.[18] His eight-foot-tall body, his superhuman physical strength (as great as the "winds" or

17 Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley: *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (The 1818 Text), ed. James Rieger (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974, 1982), 165. All future references to this edition will be cited in the text.

"a mountain stream" [74]), his predilection for deserted mountain ranges and gloomy glaciers, and above all his origin in a transgression of the boundary between life and death – all render him both "obscure" and "vast", the hallmarks of the sublime. Throughout the novel, his appearance causes in the other characters "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling", a Gothic *frisson* of pure terror.

But Mary Shelley's identification of Frankenstein's creature with the Burkean sublime does more than arouse a powerful aesthetic response in the reader. She draws our attention to the semiotic significance of the sublime and to the dangerous gender politics which it encodes. Thomas Weiskel has spelled out the epistemological significance of the sublime. Encountering a sublime landscape, the human mind tries to determine the meaning of the image it confronts. In the negative, Burkean sublime, the human mind acknowledges its own finitude and limitations in the face of divine power; in this reading, what is signified by the landscape (divine omnipotence, almighty nature) is greater than the signifier (the landscape and the artist's representation of it). In the positive, Kantian, Coleridgean and Wordsworthian sublime, the landscape inspires the artistic imagination to a sense of its own creative powers, its capacity to fuse with the life-generating spirit of the universe. In this reading, what is signified (the landscape) is less than the signifier (the poetic language or painted image produced by the human imagination); thus the human mind finally confronts its own transcendent power (*Vernunft*) rather than the power of the other.

With this distinction in mind, we can see that Frankenstein's creature embodies both the negative and positive modes of the sublime. On the one hand, he is a vast power beyond human linguistic control. Like the wrath of God on judgment day, his revenge is boundless, imageless. As the negative sublime, Mary Shelley's monster signifies the power of universal human destruction, the unthinkable, unspeakable experience of a deluge, a holocaust, or a nuclear winter. He is the *Ding-an-sich*, the elemental "chaos" of external nature, the never knowable *noumenon*. As Mary Shelley reminded her readers in her preface to the 1831 edition of Frankenstein,

> Invention [...] does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. (226)

18 For a fuller discussion of the sublime and the beautiful in Frankenstein than is possible here, see Anne K. Mellor: *Mary Shelley – Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York and London: Methuen/ Routledge, Chapman, Hall, 1988), 127-140.

As the *Ding-an-sich*, the dark shapeless substance, the creature is forever displaced by the mind's own inventions, the categorized and structured images of the phenomenological world. In this way, the creature also represents the positive sublime, an arbitrary semantic system, that invented meaning which the human mind imposes on the noumenal realm. The creature is that which is "always already" linguistically structured in visual or verbal signs.

Following a Kantian anthropology and anticipating Levi-Strauss and Derrida, Mary Shelley gives us a novel in which linguistic readings become social realities. Victor Frankenstein construes the unknown in linguistic terms. The countenance of his creature – who functions in the novel as the sign of the unfamiliar, a sign detached from a visual or verbal grammar, without diachronic or synchronic context, without precursor, peer or progeny – is consistently read by its maker: it "bespoke bitter anguish, combined with disdain and malignity"; it "expressed the utmost extent of malice and treachery" (94; 164).

But Mary Shelley's concern with the sublime is finally ethical rather than aesthetic or epistemological. She wants us to see that human beings typically interpret the unfamiliar, the abnormal, and the unique as evil. As Foucault has since emphasized in *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish*, we use language to name the human and the not-human and to fix the boundaries between them. As Frankenstein illustrates, this process of naming becomes a discourse of power that leads directly to the creation of evil. By consistently seeing the creature's countenance as evil, the characters in the novel force him to become evil. By rejecting the creature's attempts to join the human community, all the characters in the novel – the old man who flees in terror, the villagers who stone him, Felix de Lacey who assaults him, little William Frankenstein who calls him an "ogre", and above all Victor Frankenstein who turns in horror from the "wretch" he has created – all force the creature to become what they behold, a monster.

Moreover, Mary Shelley insists, if we read the creature as evil, we write ourselves as the authors of evil, since we can consciously know only the linguistic universes we have ourselves phenomenologically constructed. Frankenstein thus becomes the monster he has linguistically construed. As he confesses,

> I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind...nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me. (72)

In their final chase across the frozen Arctic wastes, Frankenstein and his creature become doubles, indistinguishable from one another.[19] Frankenstein

19 For a discussion of Frankenstein and his creature as doubles, see Mellor, 1988, 136; Masao

becomes the monster he names, just as in the popular imagination informed by the cinematic and theatrical versions of the novel, his name "Frankenstein" becomes the monster.

But we need to probe further into the significance of the semiotic construction of the creature as the representation of the sublime in *Frankenstein*. In this novel, Mary Shelley refuses to tell us whether Frankenstein's creature is innately good or innately evil. Clearly, this being has the capacity to do good – he saves the drowning girl, he brings gifts of firewood to the De Lacey family. Equally clearly, he has the capacity to do evil – he murders William, Clerval and Elizabeth. But whether the creature was born good and corrupted by society, as Rousseau would argue, or born evil and justly subjected to the condemnation of society, or neither, the novel refuses to say.

Instead, *Frankenstein* shows us that in a world which human beings phenomenologically construct, the unknown is imaged, read and written as "malignant", as life-threatening, as monstrous. We thereby create the injustice and evil that we imagine. Mary Shelley's answer to the ontological and epistemological issues raised by the sublime is a radical scepticism, a scepticism she had derived from David Hume and Kant. Since the human mind can never know the thing-in-itself, it can know only the results of its own processes of perception and imaginative creations. Because the mind is more likely to respond to the unknown and unfamiliar with fear and hostility than with love and acceptance, the imagination is more likely to construct evil than good. As Shakespeare's rationalist Theseus had warned in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the unfettered imagination sees "more devils than vast hell can hold". Mary Shelley clearly believed that the romantic imagination so celebrated by Wordsworth, Coleridge and her husband Percy Shelley must be consciously controlled. It must be regulated by love, and specifically by a maternal love that can embrace even freaks.

Mary Shelley thus endorses an essentially conservative ethical, aesthetic and political position. Since human beings are more likely to construe human nature as evil than as good, they must curb their imagination with a conscious commitment to a conception of nature as sacred, to the preservation of life in all its myriad forms. At the aesthetic level, they must reverse the eighteenth-century ordering of the arts and rank the beautiful above the sublime. For the beautiful appeals to the instinct of self-preservation and arouses feelings of

Miyoshi: *The Divided Self* (New York: New York UP, 1969), 79-89; Paul A. Cantor: *Creator and Creature: Myth-making and English Romanticism* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1984), 115-24; William Veeder: *Mary Shelley and Frankenstein – The Fate of Androgyny* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986), 89-92, passim; Paul Sherwin: "Frankenstein: Creation as Catastrophe." In: *PMLA* XCVI (1981): 883-903.

love and erotic desire, feelings which lead to the procreation and preservation of life, whereas the sublime arouses feelings of anxiety and fear and inspires a desire for domination, control, and conquest. Significantly, in *Frankenstein*, the idealized figure of Clerval consistently prefers the gently undulating and brightly colored landscapes of the beautiful to the violent scenes of the sublime. As Clerval travels along the Rhine below Mayence (Mainz), he exclaims in a key passage:

> I have seen this lake agitated by a tempest, when the wind tore up whirlwinds of water, and gave you an idea of what the water-spout must be on the great ocean, and the waves dash with fury the base of the mountain, where the priest and his mistress were overwhelmed by an avalanche, and where their dying voices are still said to be heard amid the pauses of the nightly wind; I have seen the mountains of La Valais, and the Pays de Vaud: but this country, Victor, pleases me more than all these wonders. 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. Look at that castle which overhangs yon precipice; and that also on the island, almost concealed amongst the foliage of those lovely trees; and now that group of labourers coming from among their vines; and that village half-hid in the recess of the mountain. 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. (153)

By valuing the beautiful above the sublime, Clerval affirms an aesthetic grounded on the family and the community rather than on the isolated individual identified by both Burke and Kant as the locus of sublime experience. Images of co-operation (between human beings – the village; between man and nature – the laborers among the vines) are of a higher aesthetic and moral order than images of isolation and destruction (the dying priest and his forbidden mistress; the inaccessible mountain peaks).

In the gender politics imbedded in Mary Shelley's novel, the female is thus elevated above the male. In place of Victor Frankenstein's and Walton's egotistical dreams of male conquest and sublime omnipotence over nature and future generations, Mary Shelley promotes a female vision of the priority of the family and the domestic affections. As Frankenstein finally acknowledges, in a passage that can be construed as Mary Shelley's rejection of the sublime,

> A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquillity. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. (51)

In *Frankenstein*, the romantic celebration of the sublime as both an aesthetic and a theological experience of omnipotent or divine creative power is unmasked as a cruel domination of the male Oedipal ego over a female mother nature, a narcissistic exploitation of nature that finally produces only monsters. While such painters as John Martin and Samuel Colman would continue to depict sublime landscapes, the taste for the sublime gradually waned during the nineteenth century as more and more viewers came to recognize the grandiosity of the artistic ego which such images implicitly affirmed. For such paintings as John Martin's *The Bard* (1817) and *Joshua commanding the Sun to Stand Still Upon Gibeon* (1816) or Samuel Colman's *The Edge of Doom – the End of All things and the Immortality of Shakespeare* (1836) represent not so much the power of God as the power of the artist to equal the creative energy of God. During the nineteenth century, the romantic sublime would increasingly be perceived as a monstrous assertion of personal egotism, the very egotism to which Mary Shelley called attention in Frankenstein. The taste for the sublime gradually gave way to a taste for the beautiful, for the domestic affections and the value of the quotidian which are at the core of nineteenth century realism in English and German art and literature and which, by acknowledging the value of the domesticated and the familial, implicitly affirm a more egalitarian gender politics.