

2 Posthuman/Postnatural Ecocriticism and the Sublime in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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In the nineteenth-century transatlantic culture of Europe and the U.S., a range of scientific discourses—medical, evolutionary, chemical, and environmental—began to suggest that human identity was physical rather than spiritual, a particularly complex expression of the natural. We became what we had always been in fact: a part of the earth that learned to talk, rather than Beings who transcended the earthly. Such discourses were reflected in a wide range of texts throughout the nineteenth century, as varied as Whitman's cycling between corpse and poetic text throughout his poetry, Thoreau's comparison (in *Walden*) of a thawing river bank to the human body, Bryant's "Thanatopsis," to the defensive characterization of evolutionary theory as suggesting that humans evolved *from* animals, rather than humans themselves *being* animals.¹ I call such moments the "organic sublime," episodes when an individual experienced and recorded an often profoundly disconcerting awareness of the radical material identity between his or her embodied self and the natural world.

This constitutive similarity between self and world was, I argue, an early version of what contemporary theorists of biotechnology call the "posthuman." This nineteenth-century sense of being organic, a mechanism among mechanisms, of a radical equivalence between self, body, and environment closely, if unexpectedly, resembles cyberpunk's conceit that the human is "wetware," data encoded biologically, but uploadable into an electronic form, into a digital self made of precisely the same stuff as the digital environment it inhabits. In both cases a definitional difference between the "human" subject and the land/datascape—humans are not nature, are mind rather than body, have souls, are somehow ineffable, etc.—is supplanted by the assertion of a definitional identity. While for some time now computational biology, genomics, neuroscience, and other related fields in biology and computer science have assumed a broad interchangeability between materiality and code, the implications of the collapse of this distinction for human identity showed up much earlier. Rather than being a twentieth- or twenty-first-century development, a nascent posthuman consciousness first emerged more than a century earlier in ways that profoundly affected the construction of both the natural and the human.

Such a reading complicates contemporary characterizations of the posthuman as almost always involving a merge between the human and the technological, insisting instead on a view that sees nature, the human, and the technological as all differently realized, but fundamentally and qualitatively similar material constructions. In what follows, I want to define the posthuman as a mechanization and materialization of human identity, to read nineteenth-century developments in evolutionary theory and organic chemistry as both producing a materialist Origin for the human and asserting a radically material identity between humans-as-bodies and the material world.

In doing so I push against what seems to me two largely unacknowledged, even “naturalized,” assumptions in contemporary posthuman theory: first, that the posthuman is necessarily a cyborg, that the critical unsettlement of the borders of the human is accomplished via a merge with nonnatural technology—what Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra (2006) call the “prosthetic impulse”—and, accordingly, second, that the posthuman is something utterly new, indeed Modern, indeed Postmodern, that our age is disjunctive, the End of History, or other versions of (to me) ahistorical hubris. In contrast, my emphasis on the organic sublime asserts that the critical question for posthumanism is not the unsettlement of the borders of the human by technology, but the materialist identity that such an unsettlement depends on, the radical connection between self, body, earth, matter that emerged so forcefully at this moment in the nineteenth century.

This assertion compliments N. Katherine Hayles’s observation that much of contemporary posthumanism depends on seeing “information and materiality as distinct entities,” on “information losing its body” (Hayles 1999, 13). Treating information as an entity separate from the accident of its material instantiation is, for Hayles, at the heart of a particular posthuman fantasy of doing away with the (mortal) body, treating “embodiment . . . as if it were a supplement to be purged from the dominant term of information, an accident of evolution we are now in a position to correct” (1999, 12). Under such a view the human body is merely a “wet computer,” an all-too-fragile device on which our software/data-based identities “run,” hardware we might upgrade or replace altogether without suffering a meaningful loss. For Hayles, this disembodiment of posthuman identity ironically aligns the supposedly disjunctively new subject with liberal humanism and its similar erasure of the body’s importance in constituting the subject in favor of enlightened reason, the soul, the human spirit, or whatever other version of ineffability serves to sever the subject from the historical and political and material mess of the flesh. By looking to the nineteenth century, a century before the emergence of the electronic computer and the ready-made way its hardware/software combination serves as a concrete (and false) metaphor for the mind/body “distinction,” we can see more clearly what an embodied posthuman might look like, and how profoundly it challenged the category of the liberal subject.

The nineteenth-century experience of the posthuman was deeply disturbing to the subject immediately involved and to the wider ideological formations prevalent in the nineteenth century—most particularly essentialist forms of identity—that depended on a disjunctive relationship between human and nature. The collapse of that disjunction did more than rewrite the human in natural terms, however; it also worked in the opposite direction, making nature itself part of the human. This reading of posthuman theory helps us see how nature began to pivot in the nineteenth century from its early status as an unchanging realm that functioned as a material Other to our transcendent ineffability, to an evolving and utterly material system no longer metaphysically different from other “artificial” mechanisms, and did so in a way that mirrored a similar redefinition of human identity from soul to body.²

Hence, Darwin opens his 1859 *Origin of Species* with an extensive comparison of the process of natural selection to the earliest human biotechnology, the domestication of animals and plants. The first chapter of his book discusses domestication, the second, natural variation as the key variable of which human breeders take advantage, and the third, natural selection in which the breeder’s choice is replaced by billions of individual creatures’ competition for resources and mates accumulated over many hundred millions of years. Domestication and Natural Selection—one an “artificial” form of genetic engineering, the other what nature is, or rather, how it produces and reproduces itself in an endless flux—are in fact both facets of the same process for Darwin:

I have called this principle by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved, by the term Natural Selection, in order to mark its relation to man’s power of selection. We have seen that man by selection can certainly produce great results, and can adapt organic beings to his own uses, through the accumulation of slight but useful variations, given to him by the hand of Nature. But Natural Selection, as we shall hereafter see, is a power incessantly ready for action, and is as immeasurably superior to man’s feeble efforts, as the works of Nature are to those of Art. (Darwin 2003, 60)

This is not a ranking so much as a procedure for ranking; the difference between Nature and Art(ificial life), for Darwin, is not absolute or even fixed, but resides only in the quality of “works” each produces. Nature and Art are up to the same thing in other words, an unsettling fact that Mary Shelley had made the central conceit of her first novel thirty years before Darwin wrote his theory.³ Both nature and the human collapsed towards each other in this period; we became posthuman; nature became postnatural. Or rather, since Darwin was right, we started to realize what we and nature always were—material, natural, artificial, made not found, always in flux, varied expressions of the same thing. The human was always built

on a repression of materiality, a repression that in turn was in a definitional, reciprocal, and binary relationship to a wholly physical Nature both fixed and Other. Change one, change both.

THE ALPINE SUBLIME AND THE ORGANIC SUBLIME IN *FRANKENSTEIN*

In the reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* that follows, I want to flesh out—literally—the collapse of an earlier version of human/nature built around an oppositional binary between transcendent ineffability and Othered materiality, and its replacement by the nineteenth-century posthuman organic sublime. The novel is structured around a series of supposedly horrific juxtapositions between natural and unnatural environments and bodies: the sublime landscapes of the arctic and the Alps inhabited by the Romantic figures (Robert Walton, Henry Clerval, Victor Frankenstein) who thrill to them versus the creature with its uncanny immunity to those landscapes' physical challenges; human reproduction via Elizabeth's virginal womb versus Victor Frankenstein's "filthy workshop," the biotech lab of the early nineteenth century; normative human embodiment versus the oversized patchwork of human and animal corpse parts stitched together that comprise the creature. Throughout the novel, the horror the monster is meant to inspire is part of a more generalized shudder at the "unnatural" itself in all its various second-term-of-the-binary manifestations.

The critical temptation, if not the critical reflex, is to resolve this structuring natural/unnatural binary in a way that preserves it, by demonstrating how the monster is "really" the repressed part of the first term or by making "nature" capacious enough to include even the creature's unnaturalness. However, to do so misses the more radical collapse of nature and the human that Shelley is recording. To the extent that the category of the "natural" here itself represents an early nineteenth-century binary that juxtaposed an ineffable human and a nonhuman materialized nature, the creature promises the destruction of more than just Victor's family and friends. It spells the end of the very structure of their subjectivity and the nature that (didn't) give it birth.

This earlier structure finds its quintessential expression in the novel's repeated staging of the Romantic natural sublime, experiences that both construct and reflect the central male characters' normative identity. Reflecting the Kantian template laid out in *The Critique of Judgment* some thirty years earlier, the scenes of the natural sublime in the novel dramatize a repeated movement from a carefully controlled confusion in the borders between human and natural to a hierarchized restabilization of that relationship in which the human is rendered utterly different, essentially immaterial, and transcendent. As Kant describes the process, both the idea of the infinite (what he calls the "mathematical" sublime; think the ocean or

the night sky) and the sight of immense power (he calls this the “dynamical” sublime; think mountain or storm) only initially destabilize the human subject; the resolution of that instability comes in a realization of utter difference from the material world:

Now, in the immensity of nature and in the insufficiency of our faculties to take in a standard proportionate to the aesthetical estimation of the magnitude of its *realm*, we find our own limitation, although at the same time in our rational faculty we find a different, nonsensuous standard, which has that infinity itself under it as a unity, in comparison with which everything in nature is small, and thus in our mind we find a superiority to nature even in its immensity. And so also the irresistibility of its might, while making us recognize our own physical impotence, considered as beings of nature, discloses to us a faculty of judging independently of and a superiority over nature, on which is based a kind of self-preservation entirely different from that which can be attacked and brought into danger by external nature. Thus humanity in our person remains unhumiliated, though the individual might have to submit to this dominion. In this way nature is not judged to be sublime in our aesthetical judgments in so far as it excites fear, but because it calls up that power in us (which is not nature) of regarding as small the things about which we are solicitous (goods, health, and life), and of regarding its might (to which we are no doubt subjected in respect of these things) as nevertheless without any dominion over us and our personality to which we must bow where our highest fundamental propositions, and their assertion or abandonment, are concerned. Therefore nature is here called sublime merely because it elevates the imagination to a presentation of those cases in which the mind can make felt the proper sublimity of its destination, in comparison with nature itself. (Kant 1951, 101)

Both the mathematical and dynamical versions of the sublime result in the same sort of recovery for the subject; the assertion of absolute difference from both nature and embodiment, from the material/phenomenal itself. “Considered as beings of nature,” we are “physical[ly] impotent” against the “irresistibility of [nature’s] might,” and can “be attacked and brought into danger by external nature”; our embodied selves do not “remain[] unhumiliated” but “have to submit to this dominion.” In sharp contrast to this material submission, however, is “the proper sublimity of [the mind’s] destination, in comparison with nature itself.” The meaning of the sublime comes not in the momentary confusion of the borders between self and nature, but in their absolute restoration as the subject realizes the fundamental difference between himself (or, much less often in Kant, herself), and his embodied existence in an utterly material natural world. The meaning of the natural landscape is transformed in this process from an overwhelmingly

powerful other that threatens the subject's physical existence, to a symbol of the subject's metaphysical difference and fundamentally greater immaterial essence. The ocean or the mountain shift from signifying nature's physical power to signifying the radically empowered subject.⁴ So, for example, in "Mont Blanc," after several hundred lines describing the mountain's awesome physical sublimity, Percy Shelley turns sharply, and predictably, in a Kantian direction, asking of the mountain in the poem's final sentence:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy? (Shelley 1977, 93)

Shelley's question here is rhetorical; this is not a proto-Deep Ecological moment but a radically anthropocentric one. The answer to "what were thou?" is not given directly, but rather subsumed under a second question about what meaning humans give to silence and solitude. The significance of Nature's material presence is transmuted into a question about the human meaning of the absence of other humans. It is difficult to imagine a wider gulf between a material, extrahuman nature and a human conceived as an imagining mind than what Shelley opens here, or a more thoroughgoing dominance of the human/immaterial. Mont Blanc's immense physical presence and power is celebrated in awestruck language earlier in a way that ultimately serves to emphasize, as it does in Kant, the complete transcendence of the human from the physical.

Again and again, *Frankenstein* sets up such moments of sublimity for its central male character, only to consistently interrupt the expected Kantian resolution with the arrival of the creature. Indeed, after building the creature, *every* time Victor tries for the sublime the creature shows up immediately, whether mushing on a dog sled, bounding up an alpine cliff, or demanding a long conversation in a hut with his maker. Within a novel so profoundly concerned with the definition of the human, and the ontological and epistemological status of the natural, such interruptions represent more than the individual failure of Victor Frankenstein; Shelley calls into question both that definition and that status, and does so by substituting the creature for the traditional anthropocentric resolution of the sublime. The creature disrupts the sublime formation of the human/natural binary, and in doing so changes the definition of both.

Take, for example, the pivotal moment in the novel when Victor Frankenstein first interacts with his spurned creation. He is on an alpine hiking trip with his father and Clerval on Montavert, in view of Mont Blanc. Despondent, Victor sets out alone to scale the summit in the midst of a rainstorm, hoping that the sublime scene will restore him, as it has in the past:

I remembered the effect the view of the tremendous and ever moving glacier had produced upon my mind when I first saw it. It had then

filled me with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy. The sight of the awful and majestic in nature had indeed always the effect of solemnizing my mind and causing me to forget the passing cares of life. I determined to go alone, for I was well acquainted with the path, and the presence of another would destroy the solitary grandeur of the scene. (Shelley, 2009, 120)

And, initially, the setting succeeds in producing the sublime in Victor, which is to say in producing its own dematerialized departure and Victor's immaterial transcendence, giving "wings to [his] soul" and allowing him to "soar from the obscure world to light and joy." The familiar human/immaterial versus natural/material binary is proffered here, only to collapse with near-comic rapidity as the creature arrives:

It was noon when I arrived at the top of the ascent. . . . From that side where I now stood, Montavert was exactly opposite at the distance of a league, and above it rose Mont Blanc in awful majesty. I remained in a recess of the rock, gazing on this wonderful and stupendous scene. The sea, or rather vast river of ice, wound among its dependent mountains whose aerial summits hung over its recesses. Their icy and glittering peaks shone in sunlight over the clouds. My heart, which before was sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy. I exclaimed—'Wandering spirits, if indeed ye wander and do not rest in your narrow beds, allow me this faint happiness or take me as your companion away from the joys of life.' As I said this, I suddenly beheld the figure of a man at some distance advancing toward me with superhuman speed. (2009, 122)

Not exactly a wandering *spirit* here, the "figure of a man" proves to be an animated amalgam of corpse parts, one without any bed, narrow or otherwise, and as reciprocally committed to Victor's profound unhappiness as Victor is to rejecting him utterly as a "companion." At the precise moment when the Kantian sublime is poised to convert the landscape's materiality into a vast mirror of Victor's own transcendent narcissism—as if the Alps existed to relieve him of his sorrows upon request!—the creature shows up, interrupts, changes the subjects, and the objects, too.

POSTHUMAN/POSTNATURAL: THE NATURE OF THE CREATURE

In the place of the mutually defining human/ineffable versus natural/material binary produced by the traditional hierarchic resolution of the Romantic sublime, Mary Shelley insistently proffers what I have called the organic sublime, in which subjectivity and materiality are fused. Rather

than resolving as an absolute division, the profound instability between self and world that marks the initial moment of the sublime collapses altogether in the (putatively) horrifying monster. He/it merges each side of the binary of the traditional sublime, at once uncannily material—he's meat, composed of dead human and animal body parts—and uncannily immaterial—he talks, has consciousness, emotions, desire, despite, or while, being meat. The horror he inspires stems, then, from contradictory sources: he's at once *too* natural and *unnatural*, both an excessively organic, material, fleshy other, and the artificial posthuman creation of nineteenth-century biotechnology.

This contradiction is, indeed, constitutive of the context that gives birth to the creature, Victor's "workshop of filthy creation" (2009, 78), a place that substitutes manufacture for womb, and conjoins artifice and filth.⁵ Victor insists that the process of creating the creature involved not only the pursuit of forbidden, if not blasphemous, knowledge, but also excessive and inappropriate contact with the materiality of nature and the body: "I pursued nature to her most secret hiding places . . . dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay. . . . I collected bones from charnel houses and with profane fingers meddled with the secrets of the human frame. . . . [t]he dissecting room and the slaughterhouse furnished many of my materials" (2009, 78–79).⁶ The result is a creature for whom identity and embodiment are synonymous, an eight-foot-tall being in whom physicality is excessively, if not monstrously, dominant:

His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black and flowing; and his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion, and straight black lips. (2009, 81)

Half of what makes the creature frightening, indeed what makes all the stereotypically "normal" individuals in the book immediately attack or flee in horror at the mere sight of him, springs from the way Victor/Shelley's construction so absolutely foregrounds his fleshy materiality. He's not just enormous with nonnormative facial features, not merely different or ugly; he produces, as Lennard Davis puts it, a "disruption in the . . . sensory field" itself (Davis 1995, 128). This disruption stems not simply from his surface appearance, in other words, but from the way his surface fails to signify, fails to make him a readily comprehensible object. A "normal" embodiment in the book signifies anything but materiality; the body's surface leads the viewer immediately away from the body and into its cultural/representative function, signifying, for example, Elizabeth and Clerval's

perfect incarnation of Europeanized gender, not the flesh that underlies that gender, Safie's heteronormative desirability "despite" her race, Victor's bourgeois happiness or lonely romantic suffering, and so on, not his masturbatory sexuality or gynophobic nausea.

In every "normal" case, then, the material body "means" the immaterial self. In sharp contrast, the monster's surface signifies his literal, material interiority. His lips, the primary entrance to the inside of the body, are the "wrong" shape and color; his eyes, the "windows of the soul," are gray with gray pupils; his face is "shriveled"; his skin "scarcely cover[s] the work of muscles and arteries beneath." Put another way, he's the natural sublime—but the organic version, not the Kantian/Romantic one. Like the mountain or ocean, his dominant materiality produces a representational crisis for the viewer. However, rather than the definitional bifurcation between an immaterial human self and a wholly material natural Other that resolves the latter sublime, the creature collapses that binary, unifying the self and nature under the sign of materiality in a way that aligns the (post)human with the natural and material.

Furthermore, as Lennard Davis (1995) claims in his insightful Lacanian commentary on the novel, the horror the monster's body inspires in "normal" people is in fact a repression of the fragmentary quality of all our embodied experience, of our "true" patchwork selves. For Lacan, as infants, our physical experience of the body is not unified: our limbs flail, we burp, excrete, vomit, and so forth without voluntary control; we have to "find our toes" again and again. But when, in Lacan's "mirror stage," we witness our reflection, and our well-meaning parents point to the image of our bodily wholeness and repeat "that's you!," we learn that our physical experience of materialized fragmentation is at odds with the specular unity that we are (supposed) to be. As Davis puts it, in an analysis that links the disabled body to the creature's:

The process extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality . . . and, lastly to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity. When the child points to an image in the mirror . . . the child recognizes (actually misrecognizes) that unified image as his or her self. That identification is really the donning of an identity, an "armor" against the chaotic or fragmentary body.

In this sense, the disabled body is a direct *imago* of the repressed fragmented body. The disabled body causes a kind of hallucination of the mirror phase gone wrong. The subject looks at the disabled body and has a moment of cognitive dissonance, or should we say a moment of cognitive resonance with the earlier state of fragmentation. Rather than seeing the whole body in the mirror, the subject sees the repressed fragmented body; rather than seeing the object of desire, as controlled by the Other, the subject sees the true self of the fragmented body. (1995, 139)

Hence, for Davis, the horror and violence that the creature's appearance universally precipitates is a repressive operation, the forceful denial of the fact of our own materiality, of the various body parts we unify and repress under the sign of Elizabeth Lavenza or Paul Outka. The monster's body is our own writ (literally) large. The horror the monster produces, the eruption of the organic sublime, the emergence of the posthuman, is a repressed moment of self-recognition, the awareness of an identity between the self and the material body. Meet your meat.

This alignment not only changes the human into the posthuman, but changes the identity of the second term as well; nature becomes postnatural in the organic sublime. Shelley is not *simply* collapsing the human into the physical as later versions of the story do, making the creature a lumbering and inarticulate figure with a bolt through its neck. Her excessively physical creature is also an autodidact who speaks beautifully, reads Milton, Plutarch, and Goethe, insistently and articulately demands his rights from Victor. He's Percy Shelley (if anyone), not a mentally deficient Herman Munster. The creature is horrific both because he is excessively natural/physical/material—meat—and because he is *unnatural*, artificial, a blasphemous incarnation of human technology. He's *talking* meat, a soulless, speaking materiality, what Timothy Morton memorably calls "a horrific abject that speaks beautiful Enlightenment prose, a piece of butcher's meat with blinking eyes" (Morton 2007, 194).

Donna Haraway claims, in her justly famous "Manifesto for Cyborgs," that this combination is a quintessential characteristic of the posthuman/postnatural:

Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.

In short, the certainty of what counts as nature—a source of insight and promise of innocence—is undermined, probably fatally. (Haraway 1991, 152–153)

Haraway locates this change 175 years later than I do, largely because, along with so much of the subsequent posthuman theory her Manifesto inaugurated, she's committed to seeing the cyborg as created by technological disjunction rather than by a more fundamental and much earlier materialism exemplified in Shelley's creature and that has already rendered the natural/artificial distinction moot.⁷ The creature's biotech organic materialism and the horror it provokes suggests that what is most deeply unsettling about the human/technology merge in the common image of the cyborg—the Borg in *Star Trek*, say—is not the machine/human combination per se, but what the possibility of that combination reveals about the

materiality of the human before the merge. It's the mechanistic, not the materials used to make the mechanism, that is the central issue at this historical moment.

This difference with Haraway aside, her comment captures precisely the collapse between "natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed," that the creature incarnates, and how that incarnation in turn undermines the uncreated "certainty of what counts as nature." The creature, in other words, doesn't stop being nature when he starts talking, or become less natural because he's artificial. What changes, or should change for the reader, is the definition of nature itself. Less an uncreated given, less an abjected materiality that serves ultimately only to reinforce a transcendent human immateriality, in the form of the creature, nature itself looks and talks back, challenges that transcendent subject, insists on its own self-developing *and* externally designed status. In doing so it issues a metaphysical and physical threat—an evolutionary one, indeed—to "human" hegemony.

Shelley underscores this shift in the definition of nature by making the artificial creature so conspicuously—if not, indeed, "unnaturally"—at home in it. He easily survives the alpine sublime landscape and the polar ice; as he says, "The desert mountains and mournful glaciers are my refuge. . . . The caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me and the only one which man does not grudge" (2009, 123). Indeed, the creature promises Victor that he will relocate to the American wilderness with his mate if Victor agrees to create her, where he will be more at home than any "man":

If you consent, neither you nor any human creature shall ever see us again. I will go to the vast wilds of America. My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb or the kid to glut my appetite. Acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment. My companion will be of the same nature as myself and will be content with the same fare. We shall make our bed of dried leaves; the sun will shine on us as on man and will ripen our food. You are moved. The picture I present to you is peaceful and human. . . .

I swear by the earth which I inhabit, and by you that made me, that with the companion you bestow I will quit the neighborhood of man and dwell, as it may chance, in the most savage places. . . .

I swear . . . by the sun and by the blue sky of heaven, that while they exist you shall never behold me. (2009, 171–172)

The creature at once promises voluntary exile from the human community in favor of a wilderness where only he and his companion will be at home, while at the same time insisting he's offering a "peaceful and *human*" picture of a Rousseauian harmony with nature, one that, by exemplifying stereotypically Romantic values, "moves" Victor. The creature's repeated oaths sworn to nature in the place of God—to "the earth which I inhabit,"

“the sun and . . . the blue sky of heaven”—and his gleaned vegetarian diet further underscore his unnatural alliance with both the natural world and with the atheist, nature-worshipping, and vegetarian Percy Shelley.

Unable to incorporate the contradictory creature within the ineffable/material binary established by the traditional Romantic sublime, that traditional sublime collapses—or evolves—in favor of an artificial/natural creature that speaks as and for the earth. The posthuman/postnatural union supplants the human and natural, leaving Victor, on his walk back at the conclusion of the interview, unable to accomplish the traditional sublime and make the natural world signify his subjectivity:

It had long been night when I came to the half-way resting place and seated myself beside the fountain. The stars shone at intervals as the clouds passed from over them. The dark pines rose before me, and every here and there a broken tree lay on the ground; it was a scene of wonderful solemnity and stirred strange thoughts within me. I wept bitterly, and, clasping my hands in agony, I exclaimed, “Oh! stars, and clouds, and wind, ye are all about to mock me. If ye really pity, crush me; but if not, depart; depart and leave me to darkness.” These were wild and miserable thoughts, but I cannot describe to you how the eternal twinkling of stars weighted upon me, and I listened to every blast of wind as if it were a dull ugly siroc on its way to consume me. (2009, 173)

The once grand alpine vista is now darkened, the stars and clouds and wind neither mock him, nor depart, nor crush him, but, like Stevens’s indifferent clouds, “go nevertheless in their direction.” Rather than nature coming to signify the “human mind’s imaginings,” Victor “cannot describe . . . how the stars weighted upon” him; the aeolian harp becomes like a “dull ugly siroc on its way to consume” a failed definition of human and natural. The creature, though, is celebrating his triumph, his future, the promise of a companion and, most important, of a mate.

THE CREATURE’S PENIS

Why is it there, or more precisely, what could have possessed Victor to sew one on him? How about his monstrous testicles? What exactly was Victor thinking when he hung those on the front of his creation? Similarly, why doesn’t Victor just make a sterile female mate for the creature? Skip the womb, snip the fallopian tubes, whatever; certainly it couldn’t be any less complicated than making a creature in the first place. Put another way, why, in a novel so willing radically to question human nature, does gendered sexual reproduction play such an unquestioned “natural” role? More specifically and to my purposes here, what’s at stake for ecocriticism in the text’s total suppression of such obvious questions?

Certainly Shelley, via Victor, makes clear that the creature's reproductive capacity is central to the species-level existential threat he poses to the hegemony of the human over the rest of nature. After first speculating that the female creature might be (even) more vicious than the male, or might be attracted to "human" men rather than the creature, Victor, in a rare moment, thinks about the larger possible consequences of his actions:

Even if they [the creature and his new mate] were to leave Europe and inhabit the deserts of the new world, it was their intention to have children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth from whose form and mind man shrunk with horror. Had I any right for my own benefit to inflict this curse to everlasting generations? . . . I shuddered to think that future ages might curse me as their pest, whose selfishness had not hesitated to buy its own peace at the price perhaps of the existence of the whole human race. (2009, 189)

This speculation leads him to "t[ear] to pieces the thing on which I was engaged" (2009, 189) as the creature looks on from the window, thereby precipitating the novel's conclusion and the ultimate death of Clerval, Elizabeth, Victor's father, and Victor himself—aka the rest of the Frankenstein gene pool. The narrative nonnegotiability of the creature's reproductive capacity, even when sterilization is the obvious solution to the problem Victor notes above, is, I would argue, part of Shelley's broader commitment to having the creature mark the shift I have described as the transition to the posthuman/postnatural. Unlike Victor's conspicuous lack of sexual interest in Elizabeth, his designated partner since childhood (an absence both his father and Elizabeth ask him about explicitly), the creature "ardently desire[s]" a mate so that he "shall feel the affections of a living being and become linked to the chain of existence and events from which [he is] now excluded" (2009, 171–172).⁸ By making the monster fertile, Shelley moves the creature's threat from individual violence and horror to evolutionary competition with normatively embodied humans on the ecosystemic level. The problem is not ultimately that the creature is a horrifying Other with a nonnormative and intensely physical embodiment, but that he might make many more like him in numbers enough to redefine what counted as "non-normative," if not, indeed, in numbers sufficient to become the planet's dominant species.⁹ The threat inherent in the creature's fertility, then—why the monster *must* have reproductive organs—is directly connected to the way the organic sublime supplants the romantic sublime in the novel. The creature represents a materialist understanding of human identity—a posthuman—at home in, and an expression of, a nontranscendent materialist nature—a postnature. Moreover, that postnature stops signifying the transcendent human and instead literally incorporates the "artificial" creature as its own, indistinguishable from a "natural" being. Change one, change both.

POSTHUMAN, POSTNATURAL, AND THE ETHIC OF CARE: ECOCRITICISM AND THE ORGANIC SUBLIME

I have been arguing throughout this chapter that we should understand the “human” as fundamentally involving a repression of materiality and embodiment, and its counterpart, the “natural” as an abjected, static, and utterly material Other to that first term. In my analysis, the Romantic sublime serves as a template for producing this binary as the resolution of a prior moment of instability in the borders between self and world. In contrast, the organic sublime, as exemplified in the creature, resolves that instability by collapsing the human and the natural into each other as expressions, in both the literal and metaphorical sense, of a larger material field. Both sides of the binary produced in the Romantic sublime merge: the human becomes material, and nature incorporates the human, becomes unfixed, artificial.

The posthuman/postnatural, then, is only “post” in the sense that it follows the illusion of an ineffable human identity produced in contradistinction to a materialized nature. But it also precedes the human on a factual, evolutionary level, if not a cultural one; we have always, in fact, been posthuman, always been part of a postnatural world. However disjunctive the posthuman/postnatural might seem, in other words, the organic sublime in fact names a return to the “truth” of our “nature,” a nature and a truth that are dynamic, unstable, self-generated, the product of eons of incessant evolution and furious self-modification. The ontological (and not simply practical) horror many ecocritics and environmentalists display at the development of genetically modified organisms and other “artificial natures,” often conjoined with a pious nostalgia for a pure and stable wilderness referent that never existed, is not only misplaced but blocks the discipline and the movement from caring for the “actual” world with which we are more than just in “contact,” but of which we are a material, constituent part. Rather than a Romantic sublime process that endlessly turns flux into definition, (re)producing subjects and objects, the human and the natural, the transcendent and the material, the organic sublime collapses the whole series of binaries into the creature who is all of these things and, as result, a paradigm shift inexplicable in the terms of the previous regime. The demand the creature makes again and again is fundamentally different than the definitional query the earlier paradigm returns to like a skipping CD: a horrified “What are you?” is replaced by the creature’s insistent “Care for me!”¹⁰

This shift is one ecocriticism should embrace; we’ve been postnatural for a long time now, if we weren’t always. As a range of critics from Bill McKibben (1989) to William Cronon (1996) to Timothy Morton (2007) have noted, our pressing environmental questions are more about care than definition, about what we should do where we are and not about which places and entities have status and which don’t. If global warming means the end

of an untouched nature, if the trouble really is with wilderness, if we should in fact try for an ecology without nature,¹¹ then the creature's postnatural demand for an ethic of care in the place of some eco-ontological normative/purity quest should be understood as much more than the sui generis pleadings of a lonely freak. Rather, it's the harbinger (or a harbinger) of a much larger shift in environmental thought, one that eschews categorical questions, isn't organized explicitly or implicitly by a natural/unnatural binary or a human/natural one, is largely uninterested in utopian/dystopian environmental discourse, but is, rather, busy asking local, political, and practical questions about how best to care for the fallen world that we make and that makes us.

The difficulty of making this shift fully, however, is underscored by the continuing legibility of the horror the monster inspires. Whether or not we feel the same way a nineteenth-century reader might, their reaction—"unnatural! talking meat!"—remains readily comprehensible, at least in part because we retain both a concept of Nature as something found rather than made and of the human as essentially immaterial. The limited sympathy we might feel for the creature's predicament is falsely patronizing, a strictly bounded acceptance of its abandoned alterity, one that denies our similitude under the guise of accepting "even" him.¹² We're still, in short, approaching nature and the human through the binary paradigm produced by the Romantic sublime rather than the collapse of the human, the artificial, and the natural in the organic sublime. We still identify ourselves with Victor and nature with his beloved Alps, still hear the creature's pleas and threats as if they were not our own. The creature's nature, the/our real one, remains largely abandoned and uncared for, and the apocalyptic threats the creature makes in response to that abandonment resonate far beyond Victor's immediate family and Mary Shelley's own moment.

NOTES

1. See my own "(De)Composing Whitman" (2005) and "Whitmanian Cybernetics" (2001) for an examination of Whitman's cycling between language and physical embodiment, an analysis that presages some of the work I do here, and plan to do in a larger project on the nineteenth-century posthuman. I want to acknowledge the generous help I have already received in moving that project forward and making this essay better, especially from my wife Uma Outka, my sister Elizabeth Outka, my research assistant Jennifer Leigh Moffitt, and the very brilliant students in my spring 2010 graduate seminar at Florida State on the nineteenth-century posthuman. Particular thanks are also due to Stephanie LeMenager and the other editors of this volume for their terrifically insightful comments on the first draft of this chapter, comments that made several critical points in the argument considerably clearer and more carefully thought through.
2. In claiming that early evolutionary theory and the publication of works like *Frankenstein* mark a critical turn in the understanding of nature, I do not mean to imply that such a turn was universally embraced. Far from it—as I

suggest in the chapter's conclusion, the implications of such a shift are still resisted, not only in the long-standing and fierce opposition to evolutionary theory by a range of religious groups, but in the largely uncritical deployment of the Romantic sublime as a sort of naturalized and unconscious procedural framework for creating both nature and subjectivity that extends from Muir through twentieth-century "mainstream" environmentalism. If anything, the disconnection between scientific and humanist understandings of nature has deepened since Shelley's novel, a novel that, like the monster itself, is created in the intersection between the two.

3. As many commentators have noted, evolutionary theory didn't start with Darwin; he was the first to demonstrate convincingly and (mostly) correctly how it worked. Hunter (2008) provides an excellent summary of the influence of pre-Darwinian theories of evolution on Shelley's work.
4. I discuss the ecocritical and racial resonance of the Kantian sublime at greater length in *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (2008), especially 14–20 and 201–203. Weiskel's (1976) study of the Romantic sublime and its connection to the Kantian tradition remain invaluable.
5. This substitution of workshop for womb invites a broader gender critique outside of my immediate focus here; as Marcus notes, "In the unconscious mental 'workshop of filthy creation,' sexuality, incest, primal-scene material, and the aborted birth of monstrous babies are all conflated, condensed, and annealed" (2002, 197). Marcus's essay in general provides a helpful recent overview of the extraordinarily wide range of critical response the novel has inspired.
6. See Marshall (1995) for an analysis of the connection between the fictional constructions of dead bodies and scientific anatomical representations during this period.
7. Indeed, in her manifesto Haraway explicitly criticizes Shelley's creature as a failure to realize the fully cybernetic: "Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and a cosmos. The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal projects. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust" (1991, 151). While I couldn't admire Haraway's groundbreaking work more, as should be clear from my chapter, I do think this critique relies on a distinction between "mud" and technology that my argument is predicated on questioning, and misses the posthuman and postnatural implications of the creature's fertility.
8. For more on Victor's gynophobic relation to female bodies, both dead and alive, see Liggins (2000).
9. For a well-researched and engaging study of the ways the creature came to resonate as a racial imago, an anxiety that certainly also hovers behind the prospect of the creature's reproductive powers, see Young (2008).
10. See Hustis (2003) for an insightful and carefully reasoned analysis of the interplay between obligation and sympathy in the relationship between Victor and the creature, an analysis that ultimately argues for Shelley's "recasting of the Prometheus myth . . . as a meditation on the responsibility that accompanies the creative act" (2003, 856).

I should note here too that I recognize how "identity" and "care" are inevitably interlinked. That interlinkage does not make them synonymous, however, and I think too much focus on the precise nature of that interlinkage risks putting the focus back on identity and away from praxis. That said, my assertions here undoubtedly reflect my own intellectual affiliations with

American pragmatism and its eagerness to elevate questions about practice over questions about truth.

11. For readers less familiar with the ecocritical canon, the three previous phrases refer, respectively, to McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1989), Cronon's "The Trouble with Wilderness" (1996), and Morton's *Ecology without Nature* (2007), the authors referenced in the previous sentence.
12. As Morton says, "Far from standing in for irreducible particularity—and hence ironically generalizing that very particularity—the creature represents alienated generality. . . . But insofar as this nature is abject and its stitches are showing, this 'essence' includes arbitrariness and supplementarity. The creature is made out of any body, anybody" (2007, 194). Morton's work on the novel is enormously valuable in its own right, and particularly for readers interested in questions of the postnatural. See especially 188–195.

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