

Nature, the Picturesque, and the Sublime in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's Travel Narratives

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The sublime, an important aesthetic concept in eighteenth-century Britain, has often been associated with poetry written by male authors. William Wordsworth's definition of the sublime in the last book of *The Prelude* offers one of the most significant examples for the use of the notion to describe the effects of nature on the imagination. Recollecting his ascent to Mount Snowdon in Wales, the narrator tries to grasp the "imagination of the whole" embedded by "Nature" in the sublime vision:

A meditation rose in me that night
Upon the lonely mountain when the scene
Had passed away, and it appeared to me
The perfect image of a mighty mind,
Of one that feed upon infinity. . .

(Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 13.65-70)

As Philip Shaw has suggested, "the end of *The Prelude* may be read [. . .] as an attempt to resolve the split between mind, nature and the divine" ("Wordsworth"). His solution, aimed at achieving a final synthesis in which the imagination prevails over nature by transcending it, has become known, in John Keats's words, as the "egotistical or Wordsworthian sublime" (157). Recent studies have shown, however, that Wordsworth's approach is only one among many different Romantic approaches to the sublime.

As Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla have demonstrated, eighteenth-century discourse on the sublime is extremely complex and can be described as an attempt to "attain the status of a technology"; they also claim that "its appearance is coincident with a number of other discourses which similarly articulate technologies of explanation and understanding—such as economics, philology or psychology" (6). The sublime as a technology was invoked by various literary genres ranging from traditional lyric and narrative poetry to the more recent travel writing, literary journalism, and the Gothic novel. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the majority of prestigious genres were most commonly appropriated by male poets and writers, while women were able to publish Gothic novels in the wake of Anne Radcliffe's success, and to contribute anonymously to literary reviews. Women, thus, became both the addressees of and contributors to new literary genres. From

Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters on Sweden Norway and Denmark* (1796), through Helen Maria Williams's *Letters Written in France* (1790), to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's travel narratives, *History of a Six-Weeks' Tour* (1817) and *Rambles in Germany and Italy* (1844), British women writers appropriated the vocabulary of the sublime in a way that was suitable both to their newly constructed identity as writers and to the new genres to which they were contributing. According to Elizabeth A. Bohls, "women writing the language of landscape aesthetics were not primarily concerned with the beautiful [. . .] but with the picturesque and the sublime. [...] Women writers treated these categories opportunistically, exploiting their ambiguities through creative reappropriation and redefinition" (14). Yet, Ashfield and de Bolla include only two women writers in their anthology devoted to the sublime: Wollstonecraft and Williams. Thus the question how women writers embodied the sublime in their works has remained largely unexplored.

My intention, however, is not to discuss the sublime along gender lines, but rather to highlight the diversity of approaches to the concept in the texts of the Romantic period. In addition to the "egotistical sublime" exemplified by Wordsworth's poetry, Onno Oerlemans, for instance, has identified the "material sublime" in writings "when consciousness recognizes that it cannot fully represent the material order (which is truly 'other'), but that it is the ground for being" (Oerlemans 4). In such cases, a sense of awe and terror is left unresolved by narrative solutions that avoid transcendence. According to Oerlemans, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) includes examples of the material sublime. Jeanne Moskal has, in turn, highlighted a third category in Mary Shelley's works: "human sublimity," defined as the expression of emotions when one is confronted by landscapes charged with history (*Travel Writing* 244). Furthermore, it can be argued that in Mary Shelley, as in other Romantic women writers, the sublime is often accompanied by the "picturesque," in William Gilpin's sense of the word, that is, when a writer/traveller filters her description of nature through paintings or prints of seventeenth-century landscape painting by Salvator Rosa or Claude Gellée, better known as Claude le Lorrain (43). Mary Shelley's creative reappropriation of the technology of the sublime in her two travel narratives, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* and *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, demonstrates that her works defy categorization along gender lines, and that her notion of the sublime is inspired by a variety of sources combining traces of the egotistical, human, and material sublime, as well as the picturesque, in unique ways.

History of a Six Weeks' Tour: the picturesque and the "human sublime"

Although Mary Shelley published her first novel, *Frankenstein*, in 1818, her writing career started as a travel writer, with the anonymous publication of *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, in 1817. Her last publication, *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, also reveals her persistent interest in travel writing, as Moskal has pointed out ("Travel Writing" 242). The analysis of women's contributions to travel writing is beyond the scope of this article. It is important to point out, however, that women did contribute actively to the genre throughout the eighteenth century. Moreover, the years of interruption and the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars were marked by a resurgence of travel accounts, mostly reprints and translations. Wollstonecraft, Williams, Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), and Mary Shelley "were succeeded throughout the century by increasing numbers of women reporting from the continent and throughout the world" (Colbert 13).

As is well known, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* is a joint venture: it includes sections of the journal compiled by both Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley in 1814, letters written by them during their second tour in 1816, and concludes with Shelley's poem, "Mont Blanc." The problem of authorship has been addressed by Moskal in *Travel Writing* (1996), and by other critics (Anne Rouhette, "'S.' ou 'M.?'"). Although it is now generally accepted that Shelley was responsible for the "Preface" and "Letters III and IV," and Mary Shelley for "History of a Six Weeks' Tour" and "Letters from Geneva I and II" (Moskal, *Travel Writing* 1), a more complex understanding of the Shelleys' collaboration is now consensually assumed. According to Moskal, the Shelleys "both explicitly and implicitly, identify Mary Shelley as one of the authors of the volume [. . .] and as *the author* of the work (*Travel Writing* 7 10n). Thus, although this article focuses on the sections attributed to Mary Shelley, the joint publication suggests a dialogic relationship between the separate sections of the work, implied by the use of a common surviving notebook and by their frequent reference to the volume as a collaborative work (Moskal, *Travel Writing*, 6-7 6n).

The originality of *History* lies mostly in the fact that Mary and Percy were among the first British travellers to cross the continent in 1814, soon after the end of the Napoleonic wars. Their descriptions typically merge reflections on landscape and on the consequences of recent political events. This political dimension is particularly important in the section attributed to Mary Shelley. According to Benjamin Colbert, "for travel writers, political events challenged the travel book's traditional role as 'pleasurable instruction' . . . [and] more and more, landscapes were celebrated and mourned as scenes

of martial power or in their relation to revolutionary figures, most notably Rousseau and Napoleon” (15). Mary Shelley’s narrative is rich in references to contemporary political affairs. As the narrator states, “We now approached scenes that reminded us of what we had nearly forgotten, that France had lately been the country in which great and extraordinary events had taken place” (*History* 18-19). The narrator’s descriptions of the sublime thus merge and acquire both a pictorial and a political dimension. As for Mary Shelley’s ideology, it transpires timidly but clearly in her frequent comments on the desolation she witnessed in north-eastern France. Recollecting her visit to the town of Nogent, recently left devastated by the Cossacks, she gives voice to her rejection of war: “The distress of the inhabitants, whose houses had been burned, their cattle killed, and all their wealth destroyed, has given a sting to my detestation of war, which none can feel who have not travelled through a country pillaged and wasted by this plague, which, in his pride, man inflicts upon his fellow” (19). These reflections acquire a deeper political meaning in the second part of the narrative, as they are more clearly associated with Napoleon as the ultimate cause of these human tragedies, thus introducing the “human sublime.”

Both major parts of *History*, “History of a Six Weeks’ Tour” and “Letters” I and II, invoke sources and feelings pertaining both to the “egotistical” and to the “material” sublime. For example, in the first part of the narrative, the narrator describes crossing the region of Franche-Comté that lies at the border with Switzerland:

Our road led to the summit of the hills that environ Besançon. From the top of one of these *we saw* the whole expanse of the valley filled with *a white undulating mist which was pierced like islands by* [the] piny mountains. The sun had just risen, and a ray of red light lay upon the *waves* of this *fluctuating* vapour. To the west opposite the sun, it seemed driven by the light against the rocks in immense masses of foaming cloud, until it became lost in the distance mixing its tints with the fleecy sky. (34-35; emphasis added)¹

The narrator provides a dynamic description, in which the immensity of the view is created by a vast mist, pierced by the mountain summits, reminiscent of Wordsworth’s episode of Mount Snowdon in *The Prelude* (Book 14). Wordsworth’s description focuses on the “vapours” broken by the hill tops:

and lo! as I looked up,
The Moon hung naked in a firmament
Of azure without cloud, and at my feet
Rested a *silent sea of hoary mist*.

A hundred hills their dusky backs upheaved
All over this still *ocean*; and beyond,
Far, far beyond, the solid *vapours* stretched,
In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes,
Into the main *Atlantic*, that appeared
To dwindle, and give up his majesty,
Usurped upon far as the sight could reach. (461; emphases added)

Like Wordsworth, the narrator in *History* singles out the combined effects of a sea of mist broken up by the mountains and the rays of the moon that create a wave-like movement. *The Prelude*, however, was not published in Wordsworth's lifetime. Both Wordsworth's and Mary Shelley's descriptions can be traced back to Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manner, Opinions, Times* (1711):

But behold! Through a vast tract of sky before us, the mighty Atlas rears his lofty head, covered with snow, *above the clouds*. Beneath the mountain's foot, the rocky country rises into hills, a proper basis of the ponderous mass above: where huge embodied rocks lie piled on one another, and seem to prop the high arc of heaven.

(qtd. in Ashfield and de Bolla 76; emphases added)

Both Shaftesbury and Wordsworth offer their own interpretations of the sublime scene by way of a closure, moving away from the landscape to reflect on the perceiving and creative mind, thus introducing the egotistical sublime. Due to a marked contrast, however, in *History*, the otherness of nature is left unresolved, therefore, the description fits into the category of the material sublime. In Mary Shelley's text, the contemplation of the landscape is reproduced with "a picture effect," also known as "hypotyposis" (Louvel 37), signaled by the introductory verb "saw," aiming to unify the two roles of the narrative: narrating and sketching the landscape.

In the second part of the narrative, written in an epistolary form, the first letter, signed by "M," describes the view on the road from Poligny to Champagnolles in greater detail, employing with greater confidence the terminology of the material sublime:

The scenery perpetually grows more *wonderful and sublime*: pine forests of *impenetrable* thickness, and *untrodden*, nay, *inaccessible* expanse spread on every side. Sometimes the dark woods descending, follow the route into the valleys, the distorted trees struggling with knotted roots between the most *barren clefts*; . . . the sun occasionally shone through these showers, and

illuminated *the magnificent ravines of the mountains*, whose gigantic pines were laden with snow, some wreathed round by the lines of scattered and lingering vapour; others darting their dark spires into the sunny skies, brilliantly clear and azure. (88-91; emphases added)

The adjectives employed by “M” underline the savage aspect of nature in the region, and the sublime is an attribute of the untamed, wild, barren, or luxurious landscape. The description emphasizes the absence of human intervention, or even presence.

In a second description of a landscape from the mountain resort of Les Rousses, commanding a view over Switzerland, “M” makes a comparison between the sublime and the picturesque:

The prospect around, however, was *sufficiently sublime* to command our attention— never was scene more *awfully desolate*. The trees in these regions are incredibly large, and stand in scattered clumps over the white wilderness; the vast expanse of snow was chequered only by these gigantic pines, and the poles that marked our road: *no river or rock-encircled lawn relieved the eye, by adding the picturesque to the sublime*. (93; emphases added)

The narrator’s vocabulary is inspired by Gilpin’s *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (1772). In the third essay, in particular, Gilpin draws an analogy between sketching and writing: “the *art of sketching* is to the picturesque traveller, what the art of writing is to the scholar” (61). The fact that Percy’s entries in journals used at Geneva are interspersed with sketches of trees, of Mount Blanc, and of the Swiss lakes, reveals his and Mary’s intention to follow Gilpin’s suggestions and combine pictorial effects in words and images.² In his second essay, “On Picturesque Travel,” Gilpin discusses one of the frequent eighteenth-century distinctions between the sublime and the beautiful: “Sublimity alone cannot make an object picturesque. However grand the mountain, or the rock may be, it has no claim to this epithet, unless its form, its colour and its accompaniment have some degree of beauty” (43). According to Gilpin, sublimity is an intrinsic quality of the landscape that responds to the composition of paintings by Rosa (1615-73), Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), and Gellée (Claude le Lorrain) (1600-82). In “M”’s interpretation of Gilpin, sublimity becomes synonymous with immensity and wildness in nature.

In Percy’s contribution to *History*, signed as “S,” a different approach to the sublime is introduced when places become associated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. About the destruction of the chapel of Julie and St. Preux by the convent of St. Bernard, “S” writes:

I know that an isolated man is sometimes restrained by shame from outraging the venerable feelings arising out of the *memory of genius*, which once made nature even lovelier than itself; but associated man holds it as the very sacrament of his union to forswear all delicacy, all benevolence, all remorse, all that is true, or tender, or *sublime*. (134-35; emphasis added)

According to Moskal, Mary and Percy's search for sublimity was motivated by the desire to find an alternative form to Napoleon's military ventures. In *History*, "the writing of the second journey engages (Napoleon's) political defeat philosophically and aesthetically, as the Shelleys focus on the forms of sublimity and power that outlast Napoleon: the literary genius of Rousseau and the natural sublimity of Lake Geneva and Mont Blanc" (Moskal, "Travel Writing" 244). The two are connected in *History*, since Rousseau's narrative and his experience become the epitome of human sublimity, and this, in turn, is associated with the concept of "genius." In his *Lectures*, Hugh Blair created the concept of "the moral or sentimental sublime," as "arising from certain exertions of the human mind . . . all, or chiefly, of that class, which comes under the name of magnanimity or heroism" (qtd. in Ashfield and de Bolla 215). For Percy and Mary, Rousseau's unique contribution to mankind was to provide the ideals of fraternity and equality supported by the French Revolution before Robespierre. As Michael Rossington points out, the volume "recalls Europe's past in such a way that the continent becomes a palimpsest, a constant overwritten surface beneath which lie episodic memories that republicans must recover so as to sustain precedents for an alternative to the Restoration" (322). According to Moskal, the closure of *History* with the poem "Mont Blanc" maintains the culturally constructed hierarchy of genres and gender: the narrative thus follows readers' expectations by closing with a more prestigious genre, an ode, written by a male author (see "Travel Writing" 243). With its analysis of the nature of power in nature, the poem offers a climactic conclusion to Mary Shelley's prose reflections, in which sublimity in nature is offered as the solution to human destruction and war.

Rambles in Germany and Italy: the material and human sublime from landscape to aesthetics

Mary Shelley's later travel narratives reveal that her use of the technology of the sublime persisted, but it became subservient to other, more touristic objectives. Reviewing Charlotte Ann Eaton's *Continental Adventures*, she singles out the description of the Aar glaciers as "varied and faithful," and

highlights Eaton's use of the traditional vocabulary of the sublime: "You cannot picture the scene; but you can form some idea of the awe-struck *astonishment* which filled our minds" (Shelley, *Matilda* 160; emphasis added). Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry* (1759) applies "astonishment" as the key term to describe the effects of the sublime on the subject:

Astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on the object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect. (qtd. in Ashfield and de Bolla 53)

In her last and longest travel narrative, *Rambles in Germany and Italy* (1844), Mary Shelley engages in a revision of her former experiences when traversing the same roads—often choosing even the same means of transport—by recuperating her earlier classifications of sublime or picturesque scenery. The narrator reveals a by now more confident approach to natural sublimity and offers a revised hierarchy of natural spots: while some locations are still associated with sublimity, the overall taxonomy places them in a different position in Mary Shelley's preferences.

Rambles uses the epistolary form to narrate two journeys Mary Shelley undertook with her son, Percy, in 1840 through the Rhine in Germany, Switzerland, and Northern Italy (Lake Como and Milan), and in 1842 to visit German Spas for health reasons as well as her husband's and their son William's graves in Rome. Written at a time when tourism was progressively replacing the more exclusive Grand Tour, the travelogue reveals her familiarity with such sources as John Murray's *Handbook for Travellers on the Continent* (1836). Her descriptions of *Table d'hôtes* [menus], or means of transport are extremely precise and respond to the demands of the new genre. Mary Shelley's *Rambles*, however, shares with the earlier *History* a political aim: with the revenue she received for the publication, she intended to help the Italian exile revolutionary Ferdinando Gatteschi—a follower of Giuseppe's Mazzini's *Giovane Italia* [Young Italia] movement—whom she had met in Paris in 1843 (Moskal, *Travel Writing*, 2, 49).

Mary Shelley's approach to sublimity and the picturesque in *Rambles* was praised by the *Atlas*, especially for "her intense love of nature" (qtd. in Moskal, *Travel Writing*, 2, 50). As Moskal claims, the narrative comes to terms

with “Shelley’s personal losses, but also with the political losses she shared with a generation of English liberals” (“Travel Writing” 247). Mary Shelley expresses her undying faith in liberalism through her open support of the Carbonari secret society, aiming at the complete unification of Italy. Rossington has analyzed the presence of republican sentiments in *History* (329). In *Rambles* these are identified with her support to Gatteschi’s beliefs and his implications in the Italian *Risorgimento* movement. *Rambles* still needs to be assessed, however, in terms of its contribution to the contemporary flourishing genre of travel narrative and Mary Shelley’s contribution to the inscription of the technology of the sublime into new, more tourism-oriented narratives.

As Moskal has observed, “pilgrimage” is a key trope of the narrative. Revisiting her husband’s and son’s graves after a twenty-year interval, Mary portrays her journey in terms of a healing process (Moskal, “Travel Writing” 252). “Travelling will cure all,” the narrator states at the beginning (*Rambles*, Part 1 Letter 1). Travelling is a central trope in Mary Shelley’s works in general: from *Frankenstein* through *The Last Man* to *Lodore*, part of the plot revolves around a number of journeys, in spatial terms, as characters “ramble” all over the western world, including North America and the North Pole, and in time, with the metanarrative device of the letter or the memorial left for posterity. In *Rambles*, Mary Shelley uses the autobiographical structure of the journal, but the topics are complex and varied: they range from her autobiographical experience, through the landscape and the history—recent and ancient—of the places she visits, art history and aesthetics, to contemporary politics and tourism. To these sources must be added the letters she wrote mainly to Claire Clairmont (Moskal, *Travel Writing* 54).³ In Mary Shelley’s last travelogue, adopting the intimate conversational tone that characterized the Romantic prose of the *London Magazine*, from Charles Lamb’s conversational pieces to de Quincey’s essays, references to the sublime and the picturesque are still means of differentiating the natural landscape she passes through. Mary Shelley frequently employs the trope of the “untranslatability” of her aesthetic enjoyment of the landscape. In her first reference to a “picturesque” part of the Lorraine region, following the Moselle River, the narrator asks the reader to dutifully fill in the gaps left by the impossibility of describing the scene:

. . . but words are in vain; and in description there must be at once a vagueness and a sameness that conveys no distinct ideas, unless it should awaken the imagination: unless you can be placed beside us in our rough-hewn boat, and glide down between the vine-covered hills, with bare craggy heights towering above; now catching with glad curiosity the first glimpse of

a more beautiful bend of the river, a higher mountain peak, a more romantic ruin; now looking back to gaze as long as possible on some *picturesque point of view*, of which, as the boat floated down but slightly assisted by the rowers, we lost sight for ever—. . . there is a zest in all this, especially on a voyage unhacknied by others, and therefore accompanied by a dash of uncertainty and a great sense of novelty, which is lost in mere words:—*you must do your part, and feel and imagine, or all description proves tame and useless.*

(*Rambles*, Part 1 Letter 2; emphases added)

Other descriptions also vividly convey the effect of the landscape on the narrator and the complexity of her lived experience. When describing Lake Como, Mary Shelley emphasizes her inability to capture her repeated enjoyment of the same prospect over her two-month stay: “I wish I could by my imperfect words bring before you not only the grander features, but every minute peculiarity, every varying hue, of this matchless scene” (Part 1 Letter 6).

As the narrative progresses, she compares scenes in order to create a personal taxonomy. The picturesque Moselle thus gives space to the “more romantic glories of the Rhine” (*Rambles*, Part 1 Letter 8), a plain at Offenbach is compared to the Tuscan Maremma (*Rambles*, Part 1 Letter 4), the Lake of Zurich is “not so extensive nor majestic as that of Geneva, with its background of the highest Alps; nor as picturesque and sublime as Lucerne, with its dark lofty precipices and verdant isles” (*Rambles*, Part 1 Letter 4), and Lake Como is compared to the view before the town of Linz (*Rambles*, Part 3 Letter 2). There is no attempt to revise the descriptions that form the background of Frankenstein’s journey from the Alps to England, and that also found their way into *History*.⁴ The account of the Rhine, however, is further mediated by the earlier memory:

Memory had painted the Rhine as a scene of enchantment; and the reality came up to what I remembered. . . . Each tower-crowned hill—each picturesque ruin—each shadowy ravine and beetling precipice—was passed, and gazed upon with eager curiosity and delight. The very names are the titles of volumes of romance: all the spirits of Old Germany haunt the place. . . . *One longs to make a familiar friend of such sublime scenery*, and refer, in after years, to one’s intimate acquaintance with it, as one of the most valued among the treasures of recollection which time may have bestowed.

(Part 1 Letter 2; emphasis added)

By putting into narrative form her aesthetic pleasure, Mary Shelley creates her own personal mnemonic “Diorama,” a palimpsest that recalls the earlier narrative each time shaping and reshaping the former experience.

Like *History, Rambles* comprises a two-faced approach to the sublime. While the landscape can elevate and provide positive feelings associated with the sublime, a sense of foreboding and melancholy accompanies the traveller throughout her journey. The result is a personal version of the human sublime, in which history is replaced by Mary Shelley’s own personal tragic history. Her feelings are often associated with a particular place—Italy—and with a means of transport—water: “With regard to the feelings that hold my wishes in check when I think of Italy,—these are all founded on fear. Those I loved had died there—would it again prove fatal, and do I only please my fancy to destroy my last hope? We are bound for the lake of Como, a place of sad renown for wreck and danger” (Part 1 Letter 3).

When traversing Lake Como with a canoe to reach the picturesque Falls, a sense of impending danger construes a narrative of Wordsworthian “absence” or failure of the imagination. As in Wordsworth’s narrative of the crossing of the Simplon Pass (*The Prelude* 216-17), the narrator declares that the imagination cannot fully grasp the past event and/or lacks words to recount it:

The knowledge of its ceaseless flow; there, before we were born; there, to be after countless generations have passed away; the sense of its power, that would dash us to atoms without altering the tenor of its way, which gives a shiver to the frame even while we gaze in security from its verge; the radiance of its colouring, the melody of its thunder—*can these words convey the impression which the mind receives, while the eye and ear seem all too limited in their powers of perception?* No! for as painting cannot picture forth motion, so words are incapable of expressing commotion in the soul. *It stirs, like passion, the very depths of our being; like love allied to ruin, yet happy in possession, it fills the soul with mingled agitation and calm.* (Part 1 Letter 5; emphases added)

In *Rambles*, the narrator renders explicit the painterly metaphor of the technology of the picturesque. In the passage cited, for example, the narrator invokes the discourse of the comparison between the arts, named *ut pictura poesis* after Horace’s phrase,⁵ in order to express the “commotion” caused by the sublime. The implied sense of annihilation in the act of contemplating the cataract can be compared to Keats’s material sublime, as Oerlemans has noted: “the material sublime is in this instance not just a sense of awe and fear [. . .] but a sudden recognition that it is possible to see at once how thought

and existence are estranged from a clear awareness of the physical world, and that they are inexplicably rooted in it” (4).

In the second part of the journey, the narrator describes artistic masterpieces as a source of aesthetic pleasure. The expression of awe, typical of the sublime, is associated with some key paintings to which the narrator passionately responds. Leonardo, in particular, Correggio, Titian, and Fra Angelico stir her feelings, and she undertakes a long description foregrounding the psychology of the sublime: “First we visited the fading inimitable fresco of Leonardo da Vinci. How vain are copies. . . . Majesty and love—these are the words that would describe it— . . . *But if the art of the copyist cannot convey, how much less can words*” (Part 1 Letter 10; emphases added).

The narrator often compares various artistic media but, rather than establishing hierarchies, she celebrates the interconnections between them. Titian’s *Assumption*, for instance, evokes Dante’s *Paradiso*: “such a picture, and the *Paradiso* of Dante as a commentary is the sublimest achievement of Catholicism. . . . The Italian painters drank deep at the inspiration of his verses when they sought to give a visible image of Heaven and the beatitude of the saints, on their canvas” (Part 3 Letter 7).

In *Rambles*, the scenery, towns, and works of art described are all mediated experience. Landscape is filtered through literature, particularly through an instance of poetry most often associated with the sublime: Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. As is well known, in *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke complemented Longinus’s examples taken from Homer with select passages from *Paradise Lost*, for instance, the description of the fallen angels’ journey in hell as a “universe of death” (160). In *Rambles*, the narrator chooses Satan’s journey as a means to convey her feelings at being carried along the Danube on a steamboat, and on the Lake of Gmunden. The narrator describes a “scene, which will ever dwell in my memory, coloured by the softest tints, yet sublime” by quoting *Paradise Lost*, Book 3. 1.546, replacing Milton’s “scout” for “traveller”:

The Danube wound through the varied plain below; the town of Linz was upon the banks, and a bridge spanned the river; above, it swept under high precipices—below, it flowed majestically on: its glittering waves were seen afar giving that life and *sublimity to the landscape* which it never acquires without the addition of ocean, lake, or river—water, in short, in some magnificent form. . . . My heart had filled to the brim with delight, as, sitting on a rock by the lake of Como, I had watched the sunlight climb the craggy mountains opposite. The effect of this evening—when instead of up, I looked down on a widespread scene of glorious beauty, *was different, yet so poor is language, that I know not how to paint the difference in words*. I had never before been aware of all

the awe the spirit feels when we are taken to a mountain top, and behold the earth spread out fair at our feet; nor of the delight a *traveller* receives when, at the close of a day's travel, he—

“Obtains the brow of some high-climbing hill,
Which, to his eye, discovers unaware
The goodly prospect of some foreign land
First seen; or some renowned metropolis,
With glistering spires and pinnacles adorned,
Which now the setting sun gilds with his beams.”

(Part 3 Letter 2; emphases added)

By complementing her own description with Milton's simile, Mary Shelley introduces into her narrative Burke's analysis of the power of Milton's poetry in creating the sublime through “indeterminacy.”

The third section of *Rambles*, devoted for the most part to the journey through Italy, is characterized by an increased use of poetic references not only to Milton but also to Dante so as to transform a tourist narrative into a personal and, occasionally, sublime experience. Thus, recalling Percy Shelley's celebration of Dante in “A Defense of Poetry,” she ascribes to Dante's poetry the power of elevation typically attributed to Milton: “The pathetic tenderness of the Purgatorio, wins its way to the ear; and again the soul is elevated and rapt by the sublime hymns to heavenly love, contained in the Paradiso” (*Rambles*, Part 1, Letter 9).

In *Rambles*, Mary Shelley also explicitly lays out her own rules in order to find a balance between an eighteenth-century aesthetic appreciation of landscape based on the pictorial categories of the sublime and the beautiful, and a modern, cultivated sensibility nourished by Murray's guidebooks and art history manuals like that of Alexis-François Rio's:

I believe, in all matters of art, good taste results from natural powers joined to familiarity with the best productions. To read sublime poetry, to hear excellent music, to view the finest pictures, the most admirable statues, and harmonious and stately architecture, is the best school in which to learn to appreciate what approaches nearest to perfection in each. (Part 3 Letter 12)

As has been shown, the use of well-known poetic examples associated with sublimity in *Rambles* illustrates Mary Shelley's ability to explore the full spectrum of contemporary and earlier approaches to the sublime in order to provide her readers with a complex aesthetic experience that unifies travel writing, autobiography, and art criticism.

In her travel narratives, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* and *Rambles in Italy and Germany*, Mary Shelley confidently reappropriates the technology of the sublime. Both narratives revise the traditional scope of the sublime by replacing the eighteenth-century search for an ontological experience with an autobiographical narrative, interspersed with “spots of time” of Wordsworthian inspiration. Yet, while *History* terminates with a final poetic celebration of “Power” in the poem “Mont Blanc,” thus giving pre-eminence to poetry as a means of dealing with the sublime, *Rambles* is invested with a larger scope, and explores sublimity not only in the landscape, but also in the visual arts, in poetry, and in the past. As poetic references increase, so does the reader’s sense that the search for the sublime is not an end in itself, but a means to approach her earlier personal tragedy, mediated by the broader European background of the Napoleonic wars.

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Notes

¹ The passage transcribed in the *Bodleian Shelley MS*. Abinger c. 63, fol. 20r. Web. 1 Nov. 2017.

² The *Bodleian Shelley MS* adds c. 4, used for the poem “Mont Blanc”; it includes the following drawings attributed to Percy Shelley: *Drawing of the Lake Geneva* (59) and *Drawings of Mountains and of Lake Geneva* (66-68). Some pages are available online as part of the *Shelley's Ghost* exhibition at <http://shelleysghost.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>. I used Tatsuo Tokoo’s “Index,” available online at <http://www.rc.umd.edu> Web 1 Nov. 2017.

³ In her edition of the work, Moskal mentions the main historical sources: Archibald Alison, Henry Reeve, Colonel John Mitchell, and General Pietro Colletta. Moreover, Gatteschi provided a contribution on Italian contemporary history, but his manuscript has not survived (*Travel Writing* 50-51).

⁴ See Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (106-07) and *History* (61-70). See also Braid, “Beyond the Picturesque and the Sublime: Mary Shelley’s Approach to Nature in the Novels *Frankenstein* and *Lodore*.”

⁵ See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986).

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