

THE LAST MAN AND ‘THE FIRST WOMAN’: UNMANLY IMAGES OF UNHUMAN NATURE IN MARY SHELLEY’S ECOCRITICISM

ÉVA ANTAL*

Eszterházy Károly University

Indeed we are very happy.
(Mary Wollstonecraft)

*A sickness of the soul, contagious even
to my physical mechanism, came over me.*
(Mary Shelley)

ABSTRACT. Mary Shelley in her writings relies on the romanticised notions of nature: in addition to its beauties, the sublime quality is highlighted in its overwhelming greatness. In her ecological fiction, *The Last Man* (1826), the dystopian view of man results in the presentation of the declining civilization and the catastrophic destruction of infested mankind. In the novel, all of the characters are associated with forces of culture and history. On the one hand, Mary Shelley, focussing on different human bonds, warns against the sickening discord and dissonance, the lack of harmony in the world, while, on the other hand, she calls for the respect of nature and natural order. The prophetic caring female characters ‘foresee’ the events but cannot help the beloved men to control their building and destroying powers. Mary Shelley expresses her *unmanly* view of nature and the author’s utopian hope seems to lie in ‘unhuman’ nature. While the epidemic, having been unleashed by the pests of patriarchal society and being accelerated by global warming, sweeps away humanity, Mother Nature flourishes and gains back her original ‘dwelling place’.

KEY WORDS: Mary Shelley, ecocriticism, nature, prophecy, epidemic

Introduction

In Mary Shelley’s writings, we frequently encounter striking descriptions of natural landscapes, where not only the womanly picturesque and beauty are displayed, for instance, in the gardens of *Lodore*, but also the manly sublime

* ÉVA ANTAL (PhD 2001, University of Debrecen, Hungary) is Professor of English Literature and Philosophy at Eszterházy Károly University, Institute of English and American Studies in Eger, Hungary. E-mail: antal.eva@uni-eszterhazy.hu.

quality is presented in the great mountains and Arctic scenes in her *Frankenstein*. (About the deconstruction of the dichotomy of the beautiful vs. the sublime in Mary Shelley's fiction, see Braida's study from 2016, where she also claims that 'Mary Shelley's fiction—perhaps because of the climatic changes she witnessed—reveals a complex approach to the natural world that invites an ecocritical reading', Braida 2016: 27.) In her childhood and later in her travellings, Shelley was deeply moved by the sublimity of nature and the images of the icy Alps or the pictures of the stormy ocean are haunting in the *oeuvre*. Although in her novel, *The Last Man* (1826), such episodes are depicted, especially in the last volume, when the narrator with a few survivors are wandering in 'unhuman' nature (for instance, crossing Dover and in the icy caves in Switzerland), in the present paper, I tend to move beyond the romantic images and roles of nature. I analyse her novel, *The Last Man*, as an epidemic-narrative, focussing on the behaviour of the 'human machines', meanings of (our) nature, and the manly and un(hu)manly features of a possible future of the race.

Shelley's Endemic Paradise

In her ecological fiction, *The Last Man*, also taken as 'a novel of environmental apocalypse' (McKusick 2010: 109), the dystopian view of man results in the presentation of the declining civilization and the catastrophic destruction of infested mankind. The lengthy work consists of three volumes—three novels in one—since the first, pre-apocalyptic part provides a romantic narrative of six characters' life and their relations, the middle one is the apocalyptic narrative of the plague, while the last, post-apocalyptic volume describes the melancholy of the end of the world. Morton D. Paley points out that 'Mary Shelley's [novel] has no sovereign God and no supernatural agency [...] eschatology has been secularized' (Paley 1993: 110). Nevertheless, he himself alludes to the Biblical references in the work (for instance, the Miltonic motto, the ending, symbolic numbers), and the strong persistence upon the dream of English paradise also indicates 'the hope of a millennium'. (Paley also refers to the antecedents of the novel: the apocalyptic poems, notably Lord Byron's *Darkness* from 1816, Thomas Campbell's *The Last Man* from 1823, and Thomas Hood's *The Last Man* from 1826 together with the prototype of the apocalyptic narrative titled *Le Dernier Homme written by Jean-Baptiste François Xavier Cousin de Grainville* in 1805 in French, see Paley 1993.) The study of these works alongside with Shelley's novel can be a topic of another paper. See also Lokke 2003: 116.) However, the narrative as a whole turns out to be a parody of millennial wishful thinking and the reader is to face the failure of all the expectations with the latent irony of

the promised escape—mother nature and her sister, the epidemic ultimately eliminates mankind.

In my reading the prescient novel is a prophecy, providing a frame story about the mysterious editor and translator, a 'chresmologue' (Ruppert 2009: 147) who, in 1818, finds the narrative in the prophetess, the Cumaean Sybil's cave. The narrative is written by Lionel Verney and it is from the second half of the 21st century; the last year marked by 'the last man', Verney is 2100. In the last chapter of the three-volume book, the narrator confesses that he started to write his life-story so as to occupy his melancholy burdened mind in Rome. Then, in 2100, he is the only survivor and he also thinks of the addressee of his dedication:

I also will write a book, I cried—for whom to read?—to whom dedicated? And then with silly flourish [...] I wrote, DEDICATION/ TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD./ SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL!/ BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE LAST MAN. (Shelley 2008: 466)

To make it more puzzling, earlier when Verney realises the power of literature and story-telling, he claims that 'suddenly I became as it were the father of all mankind' (Shelley 2008: 157). The frame narrative projects the last man's testimony into the past and, if we think of the great cycles of man, in its vortex, the text still foreshadows a catastrophic future: a warning is made not only to the 19th century readers but also even to us in the 21st century. (Zsolt Czigányik mentions that the working title of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, namely *The Last Man in Europe*, recalls reminiscences to Mary Shelley's novel, which, in its intertextual playfulness, underlines the prophetic quality of the book, see Czigányik 2011: 104.)

His narrative does not only give his autobiography, with the life paths of his friends, but it documents the breaking out of the great epidemic, the plague that kills the whole race in two decades. Lionel and his sister, Perdita are of noble roots but, due to the loss of royal favour, they spent their childhood in poverty in the countryside. Lio (with his telling name) was a rough boy with reckless appetite. That time he 'wandered among the hills of civilized England as uncouth a savage as the wolf-bred founder of old Rome. I owned but one law, it was that of the strongest, and my greatest deed of virtue was never to submit' (Shelley 2008: 14). In his animalistic 'machine', we can find allusions to Mary Shelley's wild spirits, meanwhile, later in the course of the events, he turns out to tend to become 'unmanly', showing fits of emotions: for instance, crying with his sister when Raymond is captivated by the Turks, or shrieking in his 'girlish extacies' (Shelley 2008: 404). While Lionel admits that 'man is a strange animal [; w]e cannot calculate on his forces like that of an engine' (Shelley 2008: 159), he often praises the majestic fabric of nature, 'our dwelling place', and claims that

‘sustaining of our animal [natural] machine is made delightful’ (Shelley 2008: 75). Opposed to Verney, the Countess of Windsor considers her body as a mere machine and she is able to ‘conquer the animal part of our nature’ (Shelley 2008: 73). In addition to animal machines, the ‘mechanism of society’ and ‘the machine of social life’ (Shelley 2008: 78) also appear—the politicised body functions differently, and here not only the hints at the socialised gender roles but also the frequent references to the engine-quality of man are worth mentioning.

In 2073, in their late teens, Lionel made friends with the young Earl of Windsor, the son of the last king of England, Adrian, who represents ‘vivacity, intelligence, and active spirit of benevolence’ (Shelley 2008: 26). Adrian teaches his friend the different meanings of power, high morality and virtues, and, due to his influence, the hungry lion has been tamed—‘I now began to be human’, he says (Shelley 2008: 29). Then the Byronic character (all of the characters recall reminiscences in Mary Shelley’s life: Adrian alludes to Percy Bysshe Shelley himself), Lord Raymond appears and he stands for the revolutionary ideas. He is of noble origin; he was fighting in the Greek wars, and being idolised by women and men alike. While Adrian ‘despised the narrow views of the politician, [...] Raymond held in supreme contempt the benevolent visions of the philanthropist’ (Shelley 2008: 45); as Vicky L. Adams remarks, Raymond’s view of the world is ‘egocentric’, while Adrian’s is ‘ecocentric’ (Adams 2014: 117). That’s the company of men in the story: a wild (now tamed) child of nature, a sensitive idealist, and an ardent believer of freedom. The three men meet their female counterparts though not all of the matches are successful. Adrian falls in love with a Greek princess, Evadne Zaimi, who loves Raymond. The Countess of Windsor, the former Queen is planning to marry her daughter, Idris to Raymond, who finally marries Lionel’s sister, Perdita, while Lionel marries Idris. Perdita and Raymond’s union is a happy one and similarly, the royal Idris is happy with the ‘shepherd boy’. Meanwhile, Evadne leaves England and Adrian (being sickly broken-hearted) remains alone.

After some five years of happy and peaceful period they spent with their families, the men get involved in politics: in the future England is a republic and a Lord Protector controls the country. Adrian will be nominated due to his royal birth and his talent:

Besides, is it not a shame, that the genius of Adrian should fade from the earth like a flower in an untrod mountain-path, fruitless? Do you think *Nature composed his surpassing machine for no purpose?* Believe me, he was destined to be the author of infinite good to his native England. (Shelley 2008: 94, italics are mine)

Adrian proposes Raymond to be elected and Raymond will be the Lord Protector. As McKusick remarks, 'Lord Raymond epitomizes the arrogant masculine quest for world domination, and his dangerous charisma stands in stark contrast to the ineffectual Adrian [...], who preaches an ecological ethic of non-violence, vegetarianism, and harmony with nature' (McKusick 2010: 107). Ironically, in the last third of the book, struggling with the epidemic, Adrian takes the charge of protecting the country and organising the life of the few survivors. Thus, his natural inclinations were designed to be the last governor of the country.

In the novel, all of the characters are associated with forces of culture and history (not without some personal, autobiographical references). On the one hand, Mary Shelley, focussing on different human bonds, warns against the sickening discord and dissonance, the lack of harmony in the world, while, on the other hand, she calls for the respect of nature and natural order. The prophetic caring female characters 'foresee' the events but cannot help their beloved men to control their building and destroying powers; in addition to, they are all frustrated as they cannot live fully/freely their emotional, maternal, and artistic energies. (Lokke alludes to a feminist reading of the novel where the spreading of the epidemic, being female throughout, can be associated with the destructive force of the repressed female energy, see Lokke 2003: 127.) Perdita senses the upcoming danger with the election of Raymond: she is not only afraid of losing her beloved companion, but she also fears Raymond's 'utopian' powerful plans. Her ill-omened Latin name meaning 'lost woman' alludes to her visionary powers, and her worries come true. Raymond starts a love relationship with the suddenly returned Evadne, then, having experienced the collapse of their marriage and losing both women, he quits his office of protectorate and travels to Greece to fight against the Turks (together with Adrian who comes back a year later). Perdita follows him with their daughter Clara and the narrator even to Constantinople so as to bury his husband's exploded body and to commit suicide. Being Lionel's spouse, Idris stands for the traditional roles of a wife and mother, rearing their two sons (Alfred and Evelyn), but she collapses mentally when she cannot save her children (intriguingly, her rather masculine name can mean 'prophet' in Arabic, or 'ardent prince' in Welsh). The passionate Evadne, with 'good' and 'holy' in her Greek name, is the strongest female character with artistic talents, being unwomanly in a sense, 'blurring female/male behavior' (Bennett 1995: 148). On the one hand, her strength and beauty cause troubles in the company's love-life, on the other, she dies wounded, disguised as a soldier, at the siege of Constantinople. In the novel, Evadne is the first one to perish and be buried by the survivor-narrator; before her death she utters the threatening

words of prophecy: 'Fire, and war, and plague, unite for thy destruction—O my Raymond, there is no safety for thee!' (Shelley 2008: 81)

As Samantha Webb sees, 'the collapse of the domestic world prefigures the collapse of the entire human world, and the rest of the novel is taken up with describing the plague' (Webb 2000: 121). Actually, the word PLAGUE (capitalised) first time is mentioned by Perdita, when in June 2092, it 'raise[d] its serpent-head on the shores of the Nile', then appeared during the siege of Constantinople: 'One word, in truth, had alarmed her more than the battles or sieges, during which she trusted Raymond's high command would exempt him from danger. That word, as yet it was no more to her, was PLAGUE' (Shelley 2008: 174-175). Every year in summer there are some cases of the infection but due to the long siege, the extreme heat and famine, that year pestilence 'captures' the city; 'death ha[s] become lord of Constantinople' (Shelley 2008: 191). The epidemic breaks out from Stamboul, exactly when Raymond enters the city, opening the gates, that is, breaking the seal of death, of his own and later of the whole race—despite Evadne's last warning (fire, war, plague). The Turks have already escaped from the pestilence-struck streets and they leave behind bombs to destroy the town. A Turkish sailor shouts, sailing away from the city port: 'Take it, Christian dogs! take the palaces, the gardens, the mosques, the abode of our fathers—take plague with them; pestilence is the enemy we fly; if she be your friend, hug her to your bosoms' (Shelley 2008: 191). But the English freedom fighter still wants to conquer the Golden City to be commemorated as the 'Victor of Constantinople', and, actually, Raymond ('the beam of the world', cf. *ray-monde*) is to be blamed for the unleashing of the epidemic. However, he dies and cannot see the destruction of the plague, and for Perdita, it remained only a threat as well. As Karin E. Lokke points out, none of the six characters of 'Windsor idyll' die of the epidemic (Lokke 2003: 118).

A Vision of Utopia

Upon returning to England, the narrator shows that his country is the island of peace and paradise. Meanwhile, Lionel documents the rumours about the spreading of the epidemic: it reaches Greece, then via the paths of commerce, it infects America and Asia; then it is heralded with the appearance of a 'black sun' (Shelley 2008: 224-25). Still, Western Europe is uninfected but the English fear the air as it can carry the epidemic and they also worry about the cyclical changes of the seasons: in winter the pestilence subdues and then in summer it culminates. McKusick refers to the frequent parallel shown in the spreading of the plague in the novel and the recent worldwide spread of the AIDS virus although he thinks that 'a more accurate analogy could be drawn to the global epidemic of influenza after

World War I, which killed millions of people already weakened by the prevailing unsanitary conditions and wartime food shortages' (McKusick 2010: 108). In the plague-chronicle, close connection is highlighted between nature (she) and the epidemic (she), that is, between Mother Nature and her destroying sister, since the global warming of the climate also accelerates the annihilation of man. Meanwhile, 'the narrator emphasizes the lushness of the vegetation and the abundance of the wildlife that thrives in the absence of humankind' (McKusick 2010: 107). As Lionel/Ms. Shelley wisely claims:

Nature, our mother, and our friend, had turned on us a brow of menace. She showed us plainly, that, though she permitted us to assign her laws and subdue her apparent powers, yet, if she put forth but a finger, we must quake. She could take our globe, fringed with mountains, girded by the atmosphere, containing the condition of our being, and all that man's mind could invent or his force achieve; she could take the ball in her hand, and cast it into space, where life would be drunk up, and man and all his efforts for ever annihilated. (Shelley 2008: 232)

Pestilence is accepted as part of their life—'part of our future, our existence' (Shelley 2008: 270)—as a natural necessity. In the novel, the typhus also kills one of Lionel's sons, during a winter flood that destroys Europe, and in the end Adrian and Clara drown in a storm on the sea. It seems as if Nature had her power over the narrative as well.

When the plague appears in Italy and in France, emigrants, refugees flood England since that time the English are still optimistic that their country can survive and within a year or two pestilence will cease. (Even Irish and American invaders try to conquer England, but Adrian reconciles the savages, their 'brethren' (in death) and quarters them in the deserted villages, see Shelley 2008: 302-303.) Finally, in summer 2094, the plague enters London and now there is no escape, 'all the world has the plague' (Shelley 2008: 242). The present Lord Protector turns mad in his fear and Adrian takes charge, having plans to fight the epidemic; or at least, to keep the life of the people under control till the end. In the narrative, we can find references to the great plagues (and to famous readings) in the 14th and 17th centuries and the pictures of dying humans, neglected houses, and desolate spots are described in detail. Lionel visits infected places and gets in touch with sick people but he turns out to be immune to the plague. Moreover, as several critics, among others Anne Mellor and Peter Melville assert, he develops immunity to the epidemic through 'embracing the Other' (quoted in Chatterjee 2014: 41), that is when he encounters the dying black man:

It was quite dark; but, as I stepped within, a pernicious scent assailed my senses, producing sickening qualms, which made their way to my very heart, while I felt my leg clasped, and a groan repeated by the person that held me. I lowered my lamp, and saw a negro half clad, writhing under the agony of disease, while he held me with a convulsive grasp. With mixed horror and impatience I strove to disengage myself, and fell on the sufferer; he wound his naked festering arms round me, his face was close to mine, and *his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals*. (Shelley 2008: 336-337, italics are mine)

Truly, it is the most tactile description of the physical contact between an infected human and the narrator. In the episode, he pushes away the sick man and hurries upstairs to see his dead first-born son, while his wife is running amok in London. However, Peter Melville, instead of elaborating on Lionel's racism and the symbolism of the episode, calls our attention to the narrator's several accounts with sick people and that Lionel at least three times thinks, he has caught the plague. Already in Constantinople, he has a prophetic dream about Raymond's monstrous deed and the breaking out of the pestilence (Melville 2007: 838). In addition, in the course of the spreading of the disease, Lionel does not only experience the body's weakening but also the dejection of the human soul. In Peter Melville's reading, in the narrative 'the plague' metaphorically means the desperate '*dis-ease* of the mind' (Melville 2007: 841, italics are mine) only the strongest are able to overcome. Lionel Verney is the character who still believes in 'the wondrous mechanism' of man (Shelley 2008: 261)—in the body and the soul being natural (re)source of healing energy. He is the one who in his 'hopeful despair' (Melville 2007: 842) tries to show *life* in the narrative, to keep it *alive*, for instance, describing how people somehow enjoy life, attending theatrical performances, or having festivals in spring. Certainly, in the shadow of the lethal epidemic, they act in the spirit of 'carpe diem', accepting that their life is ephemeral though still 'life—life—the continuation of our animal mechanism—was the Alpha and Omega of the desires, the prayers, the prostrate ambition of human race', says the narrator (Shelley 2008: 294).

In the last volume, in 2096, several of the survivors, in London a thousand dwellers, decide to leave the country, breaking the cyclical ups and downs of the epidemic: they plan to go to the south in winter, then to Switzerland in spring to spend the summer in cold climate. Lionel thinks that they have given up the struggle with the plague (her), since 'it is the companion of spring, of sunshine, and plenty' (Shelley 2008: 316). In the most melancholy part, we can read farewells written the 'nearly extinct race of man':

Man existed by twos and threes; man, the individual who might sleep, and wake, and perform the animal functions; but man, in himself weak, yet more powerful in congregated numbers than wind or ocean; man, the queller of the elements, the lord of created nature, the peer of demi-gods, existed no longer. [...] Farewell to the giant powers of man—to knowledge that could pilot the deep-drawing bark through the opposing waters of shoreless ocean—to science that directed the silken balloon through the pathless air—to the power that could put a barrier to mighty waters, and set in motion wheels, and beams, and vast machinery, that could divide rocks of granite or marble, and make the mountains plain! (Shelley 2008: 320-321)

In addition to the general decline, Lionel buries his first-born son, Alfred, then his wife, Idris, in their family crypt in Windsor. Then with the remains of his family—with his younger son, Evelyn (5 years old), Raymond and Perdita's daughter, Clara (14 years old) and Adrian, his brother-in-law—he travels to Paris since they have to cope with some calamities caused by the uprising of a fanatic sect. Politics is still more important than mourning, or, everything is better than being dejected. Wandering from France, they, some fifty human beings reach the Alps in Switzerland. On the road lots of people die, as he writes:

But the game is up! We must all die; nor leave survivor nor heir to the wide inheritance of earth. We must all die! The species of man must perish; his frame of exquisite workmanship; the wondrous mechanism of his senses; the noble proportion of his godlike limbs; his mind, the throned king of these; must perish. Will the earth still keep her place among the planets; will she still journey with unmarked regularity round the sun; will the seasons change, the trees adorn themselves with leaves, and flowers shed their fragrance, in solitude? Will the mountains remain unmoved, and streams still keep a downward course towards the vast abyss; will the tides rise and fall, and the winds fan universal nature; will beasts pasture, birds fly, and fishes swim, when man, the lord, possessor, perceiver, and recorder of all these things, has passed away, as though he had never been? O, what mockery is this! Surely death is not death, and humanity is not extinct; but merely passed into other shapes, unsubjected to our perceptions. Death is a vast portal, an high road to life: let us hasten to pass; let us exist no more in this living death, but die that we may live! (Shelley 2008: 413)

He is not only meditating upon the end of the human race, but also admiring the 'sublime grandeur' of the realm of ice and snow up in the mountains. The displayed greatness of nature is unhuman/non-human: there is no plague as there is no man in this sterile spot. For seven years the epidemic has raged and has now vanished from the earth and, finally, Verney, Adrian and Clara are relieved. Unfortunately, they plan to visit Clara's parents' tomb in Athens and crossing from Italy by sea, they

shipwreck and Verney remains the 'sole survivor of [his] species' (Shelley 2008: 449). He is wandering in Italy from town to town, then in Rome, he records the year of his visit, 2100, and remembering the wild savage boy he used to be (cf. 'the wolf-bred founder of old Rome'), he realises, he has gone a full circle. Now, with his dog, like a new Robinson starts his solitary voyage to search for other humans but he knows, he is 'Verney—the LAST MAN' (Shelley 2008: 470). In the last statement, Barbara Johnson draws the attention to Verney's distancing, namely, speaking of himself in third person and she also specifies his dedication of his narrative to the dead as if he was addressing the future readers as living ghosts (Johnson 1993: 263).

The epidemic, having been unleashed by the *pests* of patriarchal society (heavy industry, hegemonic politics, advanced military technology, and wars) and being accelerated by global warming, wipes away humanity. Meanwhile man's natural surrounding proliferates and gains back her original 'dwelling place', which also alludes to the primal meaning of the Greek *oikos* in ecology. Lokke also indicates the 'contrast between the sickness of humanity and the health of nature', and the way how the beauty and grandeur of nature frame nastily the tableau of the dying race, while Mother Nature 'is utterly oblivious to her human progeny and their tragic fate' (Lokke 2003: 116-117). In the Biblical seven years of the epidemic, humans are shown entrapped in the natural seasonal cycle and the reader is shocked by the inevitable acceptance of the spreading of the plague together with the fateful fall of man. We should admit that Mary Shelley, the great romantic writer was likely to have pleasure describing the beauties of the melancholy of the dying race under the pretext of the pestilence, but we can wonder why she, having written a science-fiction, did not even intend to discover the vaccine of the plague to stop the epidemic. Certainly, the novel though it is projected into the far-away future (or the past) is not really an SF—for instance, they travel by air in 'sailing balloons' (Shelley 2008: 70), but also in carriages and on horseback; it is more a warning about a possible future, it is an ecofeminist novel. Mary Shelley expresses her romanticised and *unmanly* notions of nature and the author's utopian hope seems to lie in 'unhuman' nature. In one of his last passages, Verney is addressing the happy animals:

Yes, this is the earth; there is no change—no ruin—no rent made in her verdurous expanse; she continues to wheel round and round, with alternate night and day, through the sky, though man is not her adorer or inhabitant. Why could I not forget myself like one of those animals, and no longer suffer the wild tumult of misery that I endure? Yet, ah! what a deadly breach yawns between their state and mine! [...] Live on, ye innocents, nature's selected darlings; I am not much unlike to you. Nerves, pulse, brain, joint, and flesh, of such am I composed, and ye are organized by the same laws. I have something

beyond this, but I will call it a defect, not an endowment, if it leads me to misery, while ye are happy. (Shelley 2008: 459)

In the name of humanity, the last man in the novel though he respects nature turns towards the cities to keep the memories of the dead alive, he himself almost being a ghost. One of the novel's contemporary critics questioned the title, why it was not '*the last Woman*' (quoted in Bennett 1995: 149). I think, we can meet 'the first woman,' the visionary 'seer-poet[ess]' (Ruppert 2009: 145), who, with her claim on translating and publishing the narrative of the last man, is truly concerned about man's place in nature and warns us about our future in her allegorical fable, telling the happenings of 27 years from 2073 to 2100.

Conclusions

I agree with Barbara Johnson and Audrey A. Fisch that Mary Shelley was thinking in global terms of our future, criticising, among others, her husband's and her father's reformist politics (Johnson 1993: 264 and Fisch 1993: 267), while experiencing the post-war despotism and the loss of the romantic-revolutionary ideas in England. In this sense the novel, being self-therapeutic for the author herself, describes 'the apocalyptic potential of a noncontagious disease [...] one that visits all parts of the globe and for which there exists no cure, [that] is devastatingly democratic in its destruction' (Melville 2007: 834). Moreover, echoing her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft's radical ideas about the unnatural features of patriarchal society and her womanly view on the greatness of nature, Mary Shelley, as Vicky L. Adams sums up, presents

[...] the conditions that lead from a progressive government and world peace to the near total extinction of the human population—deadly plague and virulent typhus, tremendous winds, earthquakes, storms and floods, and human folly. While *The Last Man* has sources in Enlightenment theories of population decline, it also offers a prescient view of the dangers of climate change and the worldwide impact of transmissible *disease*. (Adams 2014: 107)

Nevertheless, the transmissible disease—either physical or mental—is present from the very starting of the work featuring all the idealistic or egoistic endeavours of the characters (and of the author as well). In the depicted clashes of views, Mary Shelley highlights the social, cultural and economical imbalances and injustices being generated by 'inequities between man and woman, wealthy and poor, West and East, self and other', all of which call for 'the urgent necessity of collective psychic transformation'—as Karin E Lokke declares (Lokke 2003:133). The only hope is dedicated to the future readers, addressed by the last man himself

in the novel (or the first woman herself in the introduction): the readers who are able to understand that we are likely to have the possibility not only to spread some epidemic(s) infecting the whole earth but also to think about our future *otherwise*: in the terms of the other and being wise.

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