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Frankenstein, Feminism, and the Fate of the Earth: Virtual Reality and Nature

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[Theodore Roszak comments on his new novel *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein*, now available as a Bantam paperback. The book received the 1996 James Tiptree Award, a prize given by the feminist science fiction writers for "literature that expands our understanding of gender."]

Why do we call the environmental crisis we are living through today "the rape of the Earth"? Why does that phrase seem so appropriate? Could it be because rape is the violent caricature of union? And union, the healing of our divided soul, is what technological power needs in order to be used with wisdom?

At the center of her classic tale *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley placed a love story, a tragic love story of a marriage - a union, as she always called it - that failed to take place. In writing the greatest of all Gothic tales, I believe she found the myth that addresses all the great questions of environmental destruction and healing. Or perhaps I should say, in the unguarded trust of her romantic youth, she allowed the myth to find her. I could think of no better way to honor the insights she had buried in her novel than to tell the story again in her words and mine, this time bringing out all that lay hidden in the surrounding shadows of the tale. The very act of assuming a woman's voice to do that was transformative. Each time I fell into that voice, I felt I was learning something I could not learn in any other way. I was opening myself to the possibility of seeing many things - a broken marriage, a failed love, the loss of a child, an act of rape and abandonment - as a woman would know these things. Of course I needed help. But that very act of asking women - some of them ecofeminist activists, some feminist psychologists, some artists, some midwives, some practicing witches - was part of my education. I hope I have done justice to what they had to teach. Above all I hope I have given Mary Shelley the voice she could not assume in her own day.

At the conclusion of *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein*, Elizabeth, having discovered the dark truth about Victor's experiments, is driven mad. But her madness is prophetic. She sees all about her the death of nature in our time at the hands of Frankensteinian science. This is the final entry in her journal as she waits in her bridal chamber for her "belated wedding guest," the monster who has vowed to take her life. In the original novel, Mary Shelley strongly hints that Elizabeth's death is a sacrificial act carried out in love and surrender.

Evian, the Inn: Evening, August 30, 1797

... garment by garment I let my streaming clothes fall from me and lie at my feet. I stare long at the great canopied bed that fills most of the chamber. I think: *Tonight, were I any other newly-wedded woman, I would be meant to lie in this bed as naked as I stand now, wrapped in my husband's passionate embrace, learning the lawful delights of the flesh. Tonight, were I any other woman, I would*

stand at the threshold of a lifetime's fulfilment as loving wife and mother. But this shall not be for me. I shall lie upon this bed like the sacrificial lamb awaiting the expiatory stroke. And I shall not rise to see the light of day again.

My head whirls. Since this morning, I have felt adrift.

The storm drops thunder and the deluge on our heads; it beats upon the world as if the Earth were its drum. I gaze from the window, watching the crooked fire dance madly among the clouds; now and again the lightning reveals the dome of Mount Blanc as clearly as if this were midday. It is as if the heavens were cracking open and the flame of the Empyrean flashes through.

I have this brief time, this hour ...

I am impelled to write.

I will leave these words.

These are \textsl{not} my words.

I see the death of the world.

I see great machines in the womb of the Earth.

And I see the mountains crumbling.

And I see the lightning chained and made a slave of men.

And I see great Nature humbled.

And I hear the sky roaring with an iron voice.

And I see the Earth sprout a deadly garden of billowing fume, by tens and by hundreds great

And I hear the electricity speak with a million voices.

And I see the men building cities that have no need of sun or moon.

And I see the men turning from the Earth's fair face to seek new worlds in the void. I see

And I see the void devour the hearts of men.

And I feel the deadly chill of the void descend upon the Earth.

And I see the men conjuring their fantasies out of captive matter.

And I see the men making creatures of their own imagination.

And I see the men breeding without women.

And I see monsters bowing down to their makers and rising up against them.

And I hear the rapping at the window and know who is there.

And I hear myself greet my belated wedding guest.

And I hear myself ask for the mercy of forgetfulness.

And I see myself lie down upon this bed.

I see myself stretched upon this bed.

I see myself a naked offering.

I see myself the last woman on Earth.

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