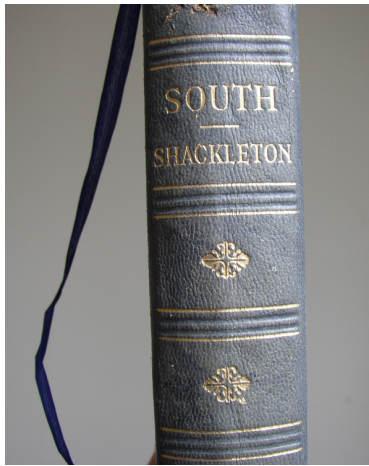
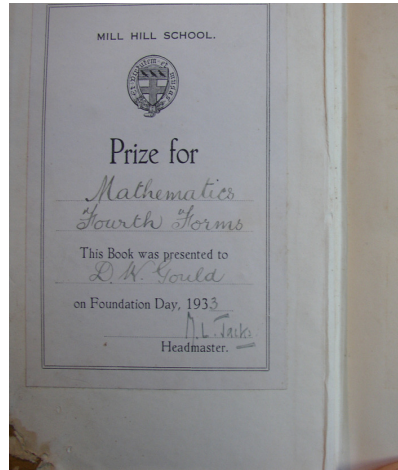


Polly Gould

Sexual Polarities: Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Polar Exploration as a search for origins beyond 'woman'



Shackleton's *South* book spine:
Author's photo



The inside cover of the book:
Author's photo

South

I have an old book in my possession, a version of Schackleton's *South*. It was inherited from my father. It was first published in 1919, the year my dad was born. But what I particularly like about this book is that it was chosen by him in his boyhood. I know this for certain because of the insert on the inside cover which describes its purpose as a school prize" For Mathematics: Fourth Forms. This book is presented to D.W.Gould on Foundation Day 1933. And signed by M.L. Jacks the Headmaster". He would have been fourteen at that time, on the cusp of manhood, and looking for role models. Shackleton must have presented a supremely

beguiling example of British male heroism in 1930s England. What more could a boy want?

We wonder after our parents and what formed them, more so when they are gone, and cannot answer for themselves. But even when alive, and can tell us their stories directly, the years of their childhood address us with the keen awareness of the ‘not yet’ of our own existence. It is a place from which we are radically excluded. It also prompted questions as to the right of certain subjects to certain places. Who is that space for and who gets to tell the story?

Just as our parents’ childhood figures us as subjects ‘not yet’ in existence, so too does the prospect of our own death prompt consideration of our being ‘no longer.’ The gendered identification with space and temporality, emptiness and the void, death and birth, are the themes at play here.

This paper is about our parents and our predecessors in life and in literature. It specifically interrogates the choice of Polar landscapes for the playing out of narratives of gender difference in stories of Arctic and Antarctic exploration. I have chosen to pay attention to three narratives: Shackleton’s *South*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Ursula Le Guin’s short story *Sur*. They all take place in the icy expanse of the Arctic and Antarctic. I will read them in the light of the question of origins: ‘where do I come from?’



Antarctic Peninsula: Author’s photo

The Tabular Rasa, Terra Nullus, and the Blank Page

In Susan Gubar's essay "The Blank Page and Issues in Female Creativity" she begins with Ovid's story of the Pygmalion Myth, in which the King creates an ivory statue 'white as snow' to his joy finds that it has come to life. Gubar writes:

Not only has he created life, he has created female life as he would like it to be – pliable, responsive, purely physical. Most important, he has evaded the humiliation, shared by many men, of acknowledging that it is *he* that is created out of and from the *female* body. (Gubar, 1981 p 243)

Gubar's article goes on to gather numerous examples in literature of phallocratic metaphors in which the blank page has been imagined as female space and the male principle figured as inscribing that space with narrative where the pen is penis.

The philosopher, Luce Irigaray, analyses the gendered assumption that underpin western philosophy, mythology and theology. "Time becomes the interiority of the subject itself, and space, its exteriority" (Irigaray, 1993 p 7)

Woman as space and exteriority, man as time and interiority, the gendering of space versus narrative, woman as empty page, man as writing pen; at each step, the dualities are weighted in favour of the term identified with the masculine, culminating in the dominance of time over space.¹ Perceptual experience is dependent upon time, and significantly, the process of inscription or telling the story is one that takes place through a subject's assertion as a subject in time.

¹ This has been the subject of Doreen Massey's book *For Space*, which seeks to redress this by thinking space differently. See also Gillian Rose *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*, published in 1993.

The Antarctic and the Arctic are territorial realities that have been imagined as Terra Nullus¹ or empty space. Their inaccessibility, their positions *in extremis* at the top and bottom of the globe, their inhospitality to human life, the coldness of ice and snow, and their boundless whiteness, are all factors, which have played a part. They offer the blank page, the size of a continent, upon which heroic narratives might be writ large.



Photo of page illustration from *South*

Frankenstein

It is this frozen Arctic north that Mary Shelley chooses as the setting for the telling of the story of *Frankenstein*. The framing narrative is spoken by the captain of a Polar expedition. Dr Viktor Frankenstein and Captain Robert Walton are two faces of the same ambition. Their meeting allows for the relay of the events leading

¹ Terra Nullus is a legal term, which was much employed in the time of colonial expansion and exploration, and applied in order to justify national claims on land it chose to define as empty, hence belonging to no-one, therefore up for grabs. Elisabeth Walaas has put the question as to whether the melting of perma frost in the Arctic may result in new Terra Nullus in the Nowegian High North, that will generate challenges for governmental systems. (Tromsø University, Arctic Frontiers Conference 21.01.08)

Viktor to the Arctic. Frankenstein is the bright and fervent doctor, who racked by grief at his mother's death and spurred on by curiosity, makes new life again from the body parts of grave-robbled criminals. Shelley's novel can be seen as a cautionary tale against male creative ambition trying to elide the reproductive body of 'woman'.

Life and Death appeared to me as ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source: many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me (Shelley 1818 p 55)

Doctor Frankenstein trains in the art of medicine, which Bauman (1992) describe as the 'modernist strategy' in reaction to mortality. Like the Pygmalion myth, *Frankenstein* is the story of a man creating life without sexual reproduction, not with the craft of a sculptor but with the skill of a surgeon; however in this case the outcome is physically monstrous. The story can be read as a story of gender and difference, of production and reproduction, creation and recreation, and a search for origins, beyond the maternal body. The 'monster' that has no name, escapes the attic laboratory, stealing the Doctor's coat, and crucially, the doctor's journal. He is a nameless, speechless being, full-grown but having to learn the world anew. He comes into awareness and speech and starts to question:

But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; ...What was I? (Shelley, p 124)

He learns to read, and can then decipher the writing in Viktor's diary, which reveals to him that he was stitched together from pieces of the dead. The monster, our monster, sutured, patch-worked together from old corpses, brought to life as a new being, has a consciousness of his own made-

ness which triggers a search for his origin that replicates the experience of post-modern subject: fragments, parts, frictions and fictions, collected into a whole, montaged, collaged together. The monster searches for the man who made him.

Behind the story of the life of the monster, is the story of his fictional creator, the scientist-man. Behind them all is the biography of the life of the author, the woman-writer Mary Shelley, whose own birth led to the death of her mother, Mary Wolstencraft, the great advocate for women's rights. Shelley lost three of her four children.

Death and Birth

Our humanity is framed by two overriding eventualities: our birth and our death. These are the parameters of our existence. Yet, contemporary philosophers, such as Irigaray and Arendt, argue that the modality of death has dominated the attention of Western philosophy. Think of Heidegger, for example, and the authenticity of the subject being formed in terms of the Dasein (being there) of a relation to nothingness.¹ The polar regions, uninhabited, but for the fringes of the Arctic, white, empty and open, suggests a perfect metaphoric landscape for this void, this nothingness, this spectre of the world before our birth and after our death: in other words the geographical and actual place for the scene of meeting the void.

¹ "In the Western philosophy of phenomenology, existential experience has also been dominated by the experience of death. For phenomenologists, death is foremost an experience of emptiness in space and authentic being meant facing the nothingness that death presented to life (Martin Heidegger, Jean -Paul Sartre). This, in various forms of the literary and philosophical writings of the Western twentieth century, anxiety – the state of a subject in relation to nothingness (objectless of free-floating anxiety) – was viewed as a valued mode of being in the world. Heidegger, for example, privileging the experiential world for the mature, independent (male) adult, taught that the authentic person was not born: he was instead "thrown" into being." (Milun 2007 p 45)

The Dasein subject does not fully recognise the social but relies on a withdrawal from the world into a solitary consideration of being-towards-nothingness. It is bound to the myth of man's self-transcendence and is founded on the exclusion of the feminine – She is the ground, as it were. The polar landscape becomes that concretised place for the enactment of transcendence, a fantasy of autogenesis, of giving birth to oneself. Heidegger's reluctance to credit his teacher, Husserl, is an example of another manifestation of the fantasy of having come into the world on the behest of no one and beholden to none; the 'throwness' of Heidegger, rather than risk influence. Oh, 'the anxiety of influence'¹, another Modernist psychopathology, as in Bloom's work on the struggle of young poets to inherit from their 'fathers' in the literary tradition.

Thrown into the world without precedent or parent; this is symptomatic of the denial of the Mother in social space, and her relegation to the private space of the home, her conversion into private property and chattel to be exchanged between men under the social order of patriarchy. Western metaphysics are founded upon the man transcending nature – exploring and discovering Antarctica and the Arctic becomes a trope of this. The feminine becomes symbolic of what is transcended, or of what just straight forwardly, gets left behind; the waiting woman at home.

¹ Anxiety. Freud's proposition that anxiety is related to the infant's utter dependency on parental care. Kathryn Milun's book *Pathologies of Modern Space: Empty Space, Urban Anxiety, and the Recovery of The Public Self*, although concerned with the phenomena of agoraphobia in the modern city, offers many points that have relevance to our topic here. Milun describes the proliferation of empty spaces in the modern city, characterised in the same way as the non-places of Marc Augé. Although these spaces are urban, at one point in her book she describe is the way in which agoraphobia was triggered in a few men by the listening to a radio transmission of the Transantarctic Expedition, and a new awareness of empty space on the Earth, as well as the period of space exploration that offered us the first dizzying views of our planet from outer space. These examples are what might induce anxiety in some subjects, but encourage others to pursue its inverse – the fantasy of male self-transcendence.

“To Mrs. Saville, England July 7th , 17-
My Dear Sister,

I write a few lines in haste to say that I am safe – and well
advanced in my voyage.” (Shelley, 1992 (1818) p 23)

She is the guarantor of male mobility and freedom amongst men.¹
She gets to hear tell of the adventure, but not narrate it herself.

Sur

Summary report of the Yelcho Expedition to the Antarctic,
1909-10:

Although I have no intention of publishing this report, I think
it would be nice if a grandchild of mine, or somebody’s
grandchild, happened to find it one day (Le Guin 2005, p 343)

Le Guin’s short story, *Sur* begins with a statement that is
contradicted by our very presence as a reader. We are asked to
imagine these words as a few pages found in an old trunk. The
narrator explains that it is with the thought of later generations,
finding it there in amongst the other items of a family’s
memorabilia that spurs her on to making a written record.

Le Guin is a science fiction writer, *Frankenstein* is a
Science fiction novel. In keeping with that genre, Le Guin
imagines possibilities that are not currently part of our known
reality, but derived from scientific potentials as yet unrealised
or constructed from principles that contradict known laws of
nature. Her fiction often explores those laws of nature
pertaining to sex and the sexual roles that are derived from
the biology of reproduction, and from thence, the anthro-
pology of social structure that might be said to follow. She

¹ “Again and again, taking from the feminine the tissue or texture of
spatiality. In exchange – but it isn’t a real one – he buys her a house, even
shuts her up in it, places limits on her that are the opposite of the un-
limited site in which he unwittingly situates her.” (Irigaray1993 p 11)

puts into play struggle concepts that function as test cases in the field of story-telling. Her fictions are not too dissimilar to exercises in Marxian analysis on the gender relation and how it encapsulates the domination and serfdom at play in capitalism at large. It is a ‘what if’ of alternative sexual relations. Le Guin’s matter of fact style of writing has the effect of rendering the bizarre worlds of which she writes, in which monogamy is illegal and people live in family units based on seasonal fertility, appear as given and normal. Our currently lived reality gets cast in the light of contingency, rather than necessity, which allows us to think differently.

In Le Guin’s essay titled *Heroes*¹ from 1986 she writes;

For thirty years I’ve been fascinated by books about the early explorations of the Antarctic, and particularly by books written by men who were on the expeditions. (Le Guin 1989 p 171)



Page illustration from South

¹ In *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women and Places*.

In *Sur* she writes “But then, the backside of heroism is often rather sad: women and servants know that. They know that heroism may be no less real for that.” (Le Guin 2005 p354). Le Guin confirms her considerable affection and admiration for these characters, and explains that her argument with the exploration narratives, are not with these men, who she certainly cherished as heroes.

What I wanted was to join them fictionally. I had been along with them so many times in their books; why couldn't a few of us, my kind of people, housewives, come along with them in my book ... or even come before them? (Le Guin 1989 p 172)

Why not? Make believe the ‘as if’ of fiction. Le Guin’s story is not a European story, nor a manly one: though triumphant and brave, it is a counter to the epic narratives of struggle and survival.

“I wrote a story, “*Sur*,” in which a small group of Latin Americans actually reach the South Pole a year before Amundsen and Scott, but decide not to say anything about it, because if the men knew that they got there first – they are all women – it wouldn't do. The men would be so let down. “We left no footprints, even,” says the narrator.” (Le Guin, 1989 p 171)

Compare the tone of Le Guin’s story to the often encountered heroic trope in Polar Exploration of individual fame outlasting death, such as this example from a web site on Australian History:

Douglas Mawson's 1911-14 expedition to Antarctica ranks as the greatest polar expedition story ever told. While it achieved its scientific goal with detailed observations in magnetism, geology, biology and meteorology, it was Mawson's individual story of survival that ensured its immortality throughout history.

Sur was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1982. The women reach the South Pole with effort but no disaster. Returning to the camp, to await the boat, they find that one of their party, who had remained there is heavily pregnant. So, the final scenes of their time on the continent are those of a woman giving birth; an endeavour also undertaken with great effort yet no disaster.

Arendt and Natality and Irigaray's critique of the Homosocial Feminist ontology is predicated on the understanding that women's experiential being in the world is different¹ and cannot be subsumed in the universal of man. Phenomenology, as rooted in the embodied experience, must account for this. As theorists, both Arendt and Irigaray have responded to this demand. Arendt proposed that the model for understanding human life should be birth not death, and coined this *natality*, as a term in response to Heidegger's² attention to mortality. Natality is the capacity "to insert oneself into the world and begin a story of one's own" (Arendt 1958). It is the principle of newness in the human condition.

Along with the Greeks, Hannah Arendt distinguished between *zōō* (biological life) and *bios* (the life to be told, capable of being written). Since, thanks, to technology,

¹ "Gestation, birthing, and childcare, relations associated with physical, emotional, social, and material aspects of the well being of the youngest members of the human family, are obviously not the same as the existential relations associated with death. These are existential experiences of life and the demands of life's beginnings in the world when humans are at their most vulnerable and needy stage. Across cultures women's bodies and women's experiential being in the world differ in various ways from men's." (Milun 2007 p 44-45)

² Arendt was at one time both his student and his lover. Although she never had trouble in recognising his influence, her exploration of *natality* is an example of her own capacity to insert herself into the word and begin a story of her own, as much as it also tells of an "encrypted erotic element" in reply to Heidegger. See Reinhardt Lupton 2006.

women are more likely than ever to decide about life, they are also more ready than ever not to simply be genitors (supposing that being a "genitor" is something" simple"), but to *give meaning* to the *act of giving* that is life. (Kristeva in Clement and Kristeva 2001 p 13)

The homosocial is the social relations between one sex, but in Irigaray this means the social relations between men that use women as exchange objects to confirm those relations.¹ The camaraderie of polar exploration might be exemplary of this homosocial form. Expeditions set out to uncover, to explore, to claim new territory, to go down in history as the first to be somewhere or do something, to further knowledge. But might it not be that the bigger aim of such expeditions are not the achievement of the ostensive brief, but the affirmation of homosocial bonds. Shackleton set out to be the first to cross Antarctica from sea to sea. In the introduction to *South*, he writes:

We failed in this object, but the story of our attempt is the subject of the following pages, and I think, although failure in the actual accomplishment must be recorded, that there are chapters in this book of high adventure, unique experiences, and, above all, records of unflinching determination, supreme loyalty and generous self-sacrifice on the part of my men, which will urgently

¹ Although not entailing homosexual acts, Irigaray maintains that homosocial bonds are underlined by a latent homosexual erotic economy of desire. "The exchange upon which patriarchal societies are based take place exclusively among men. Women, signs, commodities, and currency always pass from one man to another:[...]Thus the labour force and its products, including those of mother earth, are the object of transactions among men and men alone. This means that the *very possibility of a socio-cultural order requires homosexuality* as its organizing principle." (Irigaray, 1985 p 192)

appeal to every one who is interested in the tale of the White Warfare of the South.” (Shackleton, 1929 p iv)

What is this conflation of exploration of the Antarctic with warfare? Does it affirm the homosocial aspect of men amongst men, the archetypal form of which is found in war? It is also Shackleton’s attempt to characterise his exploits in a manner by which to counter balance the fact of his departure for the other side of the globe, on the dawn of the First World War and massive slaughter of the men of his generation. He is explicit in proposing this.

Of the Ross Sea Party, Mackintosh, Hayward and Spencer-Smith died for their country as surely as those who gave up their lives in France or Flanders. (Shackleton, 1929 p 201)

They will be remembered

Writing the memory, a stab at immortality, to be remembered beyond the intimate circle of the family, beyond the few notes left in the trunk for somebody’s grandchildren to find; remembered in the broken hearts of the women who stayed behind. These empty white landscapes of the empty page, or the Polar Regions, North and South, demand that a story to be told, but whose story? Sexual polarities that freeze gender relations in a static either/or rather than a fluid both/and¹

¹ Irigaray writes ;‘If there is no double desire, the positive and the negative poles divide themselves between the two sexes instead of establishing a chiasmus or a double loop in which each can go toward the other and come back to itself.

If these positive and negative poles are not found in both, the same one always attracts, while the other remains in motion but lacks a “proper” place. What is missing is the double pole of attraction and support, which excludes disintegration or rejection, attraction and decomposition, but

perpetuate the gendering of time-traveller narrator as male and stationary ground, holder of place as waiting woman. But even Heidegger, the philosopher of 'thrown-ness' chose to be buried next to his parents, perhaps acknowledging in death the generative principle of newness and natality, lying in his tomb next to the womb that bore him into life.

Our birth is belatedness – arriving already too late –like the experience of getting to the South Pole only to find someone had been there before. Knowing this, the narrator in *Sur* says:

I wish we had not gone to the Pole. I think I wish it even now. But I was glad even then that we had left no sign there, for some man longing to be first might have come some day, and find it, and know then what a fool he had been, and break his heart. (Le Guin *Sur* 2005 p 365)

which instead ensures the separation that articulates every encounter and makes possible speech, promises, alliances.” (Irigaray 1993 p 9)

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