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**“...so much immortal wealth”: *Life in the Sick-Room* by Harriet Martineau as Eco-Sustainable Narrative**

**Abstract I:** Questo studio propone una lettura in chiave eco-critica di *Life in the Sick-Room* di Harriet Martineau (1844). Scritto a partire da un’esperienza personale dell’autrice, il volume si configura come trattato normativo sulla condizione dell’invalido in epoca vittoriana, e di fatto contribuì notevolmente al dibattito sulla riforma della professione medica e del sistema sanitario inglese del tempo. Martineau non ambisce a trasmettere un messaggio ecosostenibile, e tuttavia la sua concezione di natura in quanto funzionale alla salute fisica e spirituale del lettore riflette i valori promossi da discipline recenti quali i Green Studies e i Partnership Studies.

**Abstract II:** This study reassesses Harriet Martineau’s *Life in the Sick-Room* as an example of Victorian eco-sustainable narrative. Based on the author’s real-life experience as a long-term patient, the volume was conceived as a normative treatise on the condition of the invalid, and contributed significantly to ongoing debates on the reform of the medical system. Though the author does not deliberately provide readers with an ecological message, she advocates a remedial process that sees nature as a refuge and a redemptive space. A re-reading of *Life in the Sick-Room* today shows its value from an eco-critical viewpoint.

Harriet Martineau was a self-educated intellectual who became a journalist, a translator, an equal-rights activist, a theorist in political economy, a sociologist, and a prolific creative writer<sup>1</sup>. Highly influential in her time<sup>2</sup>, but somehow underestimated today, this eccentric and eminent Victorian woman turned to nature and to nature’s “immortal wealth” at times of personal sorrow and of profound reflections upon life and the necessities of human ex-

<sup>1</sup> Martineau’s bibliography includes novels, children’s books, short stories, essays, over 1,600 articles and a 3-volumed autobiography. See E. Sanders Arbuckle ed. 1994. *Harriet Martineau in the London Daily News. Selected Contributions, 1852-1866*. New York: Garland Publishing, xiv. See also Vv. Aa. n.d. Bibliografie Harriet Martineau. 50 *Klassiker der Soziologie* <http://agso.uni-graz.at/lexikon/klassiker/martineau/29bib.htm> (consulted on 17/03/07), quoted in Enrico Reggiani. 2007. *Beau Idéal. Harriet Martineau e una rappresentazione del capitalist*. Introduzione G. Vigorelli, Quaderno n. 21, giugno, n. 38: 33, <http://docplayer.it/23050744-Beau-ideal-harriet-martineau-e-una-rappresentazione-del-capitalist.html> (consulted on 27/06/2017), and Anthony Mandal *et al.* eds. Appendix 1 (Harriet Martineau Series). *The English Novel, 1830-1836* <http://www.romtext.org.uk/resources/english-novel-1830-36/> (consulted on 10/10/17).

<sup>2</sup> In the words of a Martineau biographer: “It is scarcely possible to read any book relating to the nineteenth century without finding in its index [...] the name of Harriet Martineau” (Wheatley 1957: 11).

istence. In these terms she can be viewed as a pioneer eco-critic, whose beliefs in nature as a refuge and a redemptive space are expressed most prominently in *Life in the Sick-Room*, a collection of essays published in 1844 (Martineau 1844).

Born in 1802, in Norwich, about 100 miles north-east of London, Harriet Martineau was the daughter of a manufacturer, and a sister to James Martineau, the Unitarian minister and Professor of moral philosophy. Brought up in an environment that failed to provide her with an adequate emotional and financial support (Martineau 2003: 16), Martineau had a turbulent adolescence, the details of which she recorded in her *Autobiography*<sup>3</sup>. In 1829, following severe financial losses incurred by the family, she had no choice but make a virtue out of necessity: she moved to London, and there became economically independent through knitting and especially through writing – at the start, primarily with journal articles for the Unitarian *Monthly Repository* of W. J. Fox. Hardship and early-life experiences shaped the woman and the writer she was known to be, a liberal-minded, resilient and strong-opinionated individual, who never married, nor had children, but placed significant value upon friends and family ties, and who committed herself to the causes of freedom and equality in a just world<sup>4</sup>. Crucial to Martineau's formative years were the several journeys that she took across North America (1832-1834), Egypt, Palestine and Syria (1846) as well as continental Europe, most notably Italy (1839) and Ireland (1852). It was during a visit to Venice that she fell severely ill and was forced to return home, subsequently leaving London and moving to the Lake District, in Tynemouth at first (1839-1844), and then Ambleside (1845), the place where she found “an innocent and happy life [...] pure air, a garden, [and...] superb natural scenery” (Webb 1960: 254)<sup>5</sup>.

A self-defined “delicate child” (Martineau 1877: 7), Martineau suffered from poor health throughout her life, as a result of which she developed an obsession with death that haunted her for years. At the age of 12 she experienced “a gradual exclusion from the world of sound” (Martineau 1877: 57); by 16 she became hearing-impaired and started using an ear trumpet<sup>6</sup>. At 37 she was diagnosed with cancer, a condition believed to be incurable, and which caused Martineau to live as a terminally-ill patient within the four walls of her sick-

<sup>3</sup> Written in 1855, at a time when Martineau thought she would die soon, the 3-volumed autobiography was published posthumously in 1877. Cf. H. Martineau, 1877. *Autobiography, with Memorials*. Maria Weston Chapman ed., 3 vols. London: Smith, Elder & Co <https://archive.org/details/harrietmartinea01martgoog> (consulted on 20/07/2017).

<sup>4</sup> The following titles are indicative of her major concerns: “On Female Education” (1823); “Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated” (1832); several editorials on the Divorce and Matrimony Causes Acts (1853-1857); “Married Women Property Laws” (1856); “British Rule in India” (1857); “Cotton Supply/Slavery” (1859). In 1866 Martineau campaigned for women's suffrage and in 1869 she opposed to the Contagious Disease Act.

<sup>5</sup> Life in the Lake District, her love of the area and the wish to disclose knowledge of those natural beauties to residents as well as the wider audience inspired her to write the first *Complete Guide to the English Lakes* (1855). Modelled upon Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes* (1810), the volume represents another significant example of Martineau's creativity and enthusiasm. It includes a geological map, illustrative views of the places described, botanical contributions, and a comprehensive Directory, the latter being an innovative feature for tourist guides at the time: <https://ia800805.us.archive.org/25/items/completeguidetoe1855mart/completeguidetoe1855mart.pdf> (consulted on 20/03/2017).

<sup>6</sup> Martineau's early disabilities included the loss of taste and smell. For a detailed account, cf. Deegan 2003.

room. Frustrated by the inadequacy of traditional cures, in 1844 she decided to try alternative healing, namely mesmerism or animal magnetism, and was (or convinced herself that she was) temporarily cured (Conti Odorisio 2003: 153)<sup>7</sup>. The five-year confinement between 1839 and 1844 marked a turning point in her private as well as her public life. She gradually came to disavow her Christian faith, and started looking differently at her present state as the culmination of an existence that had “begun with winter” (Martineau 1877: 484)<sup>8</sup>. That peculiarly distressing period, characterised by physical pain and psychological fragility, prompted her to write what would become a collection of ten “Essays by an Invalid”. Published anonymously with the title *Life in the Sick-Room* and soon recognised as a Martineau piece, in 1845 the volume was followed (and thematically completed) by another collection, *Letters on Mesmerism*, an enthusiastic and controversial account of the author’s mesmeric experience, which sparked more debates on the actual efficacy of unorthodox medicine as well as the limits of traditional therapies (Martineau 1845b). The *Letters* were penned “to lift up the subject [of Martineau’s recovery] of the dirt into which it had been plunged – because of the way in which it had been unfairly portrayed in the press – and to place it on a scientific ground”. They first appeared in the widely read periodical *Athenaeum* in 1844 (Martineau 1877: 475)<sup>9</sup>, only a few months after Martineau was “universally detected” as the author of *Life in the Sick-Room* (Martineau 1877: 597).

Formally conceived as a treatise on invalidism, the collected essays bear the traits of a memoir proper, being a first-hand first-person account of a secluded patient (and effectively an early draft of Martineau’s posthumous *Autobiography*). The volume is one of numerous texts belonging to the so-called “invalid literature”, an array of nineteenth-century literary works by bedridden writers<sup>10</sup>. A precious testimony to aspects concerning patients and the medical institution within Victorian culture, *Life in the Sick-Room* stood out among invalid poems, letters, novels, essays of the period as it contributed to an understanding of invalidism in ways that other publications on the theme did not. The peculiarity of Martineau’s

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<sup>7</sup> In fact she was not, and the situation got worse ten years later. Some critics have suggested that Harriet Martineau may have suffered from hysteria (Postlewaite 1989: 585-589; Roberts 2002: 122) or that she was somehow a hypochondriac, who actually suffered from a psychosomatic illness (Postlewaite 1989: 588). But as Frawley argues, “retrospective diagnosis [remains] fraught with problems” (Martineau 2003: 21). What is relevant in the present context is that in 1844, believing herself to have fully recovered, Martineau bought some land in Ambleside and had a house built there, a place which she named “The Knoll” after a small hillock near the river with commanding views across the valley. The Knoll exists to this day as a grade 2 listed building converted into quality tourist accommodation: <https://www.cumbrian-cottages.co.uk/central-southern-lakes/ambleside-area/1-the-knoll-cc123182> (consulted on 22/07/2017). On the Ambleside years, cf. Todd 2002.

<sup>8</sup> The 5-year confinement was when, in Martineau’s words “a large portion of the transition from religious inconsistency and irrationality to free-thinking strength and liberty was gone” (Martineau 1877: 467).

<sup>9</sup> It was Martineau’s decision to publish in the *Athenaeum*, a literary magazine, through which she sought to address what Caroline Roberts calls an “Establishment readership and not just the converted”. The serialisation of those letters was successful at the start, but it then gave way to a nasty response on the part of the editor, Charles Wentworth Dilke, who publicly denied Martineau’s competence on medical matters and doubted the efficacy of the mesmeric treatment she was undertaking. Cf. Roberts 2002: 126.

<sup>10</sup> On the topic of Victorian “invalid literature” see Frawley 2004, especially chapter 5, 200-244.

account is confirmed by its immediate success: the volume was remarkably popular with both critics and Victorian readers, the former prising the “gifted author” of a “wise and thoughtful book [that was] the offspring of a lofty mind” (Martineau 2003: 26). To the average reader – from an upper or a middle-class milieu – Martineau’s essays proved immensely thought-provoking, recommending radical changes in the way family and friends administered a sick person’s daily exigencies and thus claiming an important place in the English cultural and intellectual landscape at the time. To this day, *Life in the Sick-Room* remains in many ways an innovative text, a pioneering example of narrative medicine, which is known essentially within Anglophone literary and academic circles, but is almost unknown beyond them as evidenced by the fact that none of the ten essays have been translated or edited in another language. Critical attention has focussed on the way writing helped Martineau cope with her condition (Conti Odorisio 2003: 148), the extent to which *Life in the Sick-Room* contributed to the reform of nineteenth-century medicine and medical profession (Winter 1995), how it impacted on the “sociology of the patient-caregiver relationship” (Hoecker-Drysdale 2003: 146) and influenced literary reflections on invalidism in the twentieth century (Martineau 2003: 28). Scholarly interest has also been drawn towards the “dominant representation of illness in the literary imagination of Victorian England” (Bailin 1994: 9) and to aspects of identity and identity construction in relation to invalidism (Frawley 2004).

Nineteenth-century sick-room narratives tend to rely on “metaphors of confinement” (Frawley 2002: 202) in response to the preoccupations and pressures of the wider world. For invalids writing about their experience, the literary sick-room came to represent a retreat, a hiding place, a haven or a sanctuary, a privileged space which was also depicted in negative terms as a “prison”. This was partly the case with Martineau (Martineau 1844: 36, 44, 60, 61, 89), who saw herself like a gaoler with little privacy or freedom (43, 44, 49, 58, 59, 130, 166, 191). And yet, she admitted to “the comfort of being alone in illness” (30), and like other sick-room writers of the time she found temporary refuge from the “anxieties” and the “troubles” of domestic life (namely her conflict with her mother, as well as of public life, which had long been hectic as a consequence of extended travelling and of her publishing commitments)<sup>11</sup>. Whether a prison or a haven, the literary sick-room became “a legitimised site for the representation of an alternative society and mode of existence”, providing authors and their readers with “a utopian order” in response to “a powerful desire for coherence at a time when economic, political, and social relations were undergoing profound reorganization and differentiation” (Bailin 1994: 9, 13)<sup>12</sup>. To Martineau it gave a vantage point

<sup>11</sup> While feeling ‘in chain’ she also claimed to be “comparatively happy” in her sick-room (Martineau 1877: 146). Martineau’s use of terms such as ‘happy’ and ‘alone’ is often ambivalent. At times she gives them a negative connotation, at times the reverse is true. To be happy, for her, is also to be free; being an invalid she claimed to feel like a prisoner but also a privileged person, free to live her life in ways that had been unimaginable before her Tynemouth days. Solitude would be crucial to her happiness in the second case. By contrast, the term ‘happy’ is sometimes used alongside ‘healthy’ in the expression “the healthy and the happy” (ix; 17, 220, 221) and in opposition to “the sufferer” (150, 151).

<sup>12</sup> Martineau’s decision to be treated with mesmerism defied the institutionalised medical authority in a field which she, being a long-term invalid, claimed to be her own just as it was of an established and professional domain. In this respect, it is interesting to note that “the nineteenth-century upper and middle classes were

to “declare” her views, to “recommend” changes, and “warn” her readers, “confident” as she felt, and by virtue of her “superior wisdom” (Martineau 1844: 60, 57, 167, 192). It ought to be noted that as a bourgeois cultural institution, the Victorian sick-room also had powerful gender connotations, thus giving women an opportunity to recount and voice what Martineau terms “spontaneous revelations” (211). Accordingly, gendered notions of the sick-room view it as the place where conflicting desires could be mediated, and “relief from the discontinuities in the ideal of womanhood” may be attained (Bailin 1994: 27)<sup>13</sup>. Bailin’s emphasis on the creative potential of the sick-room, and the “acute gap between inner and outer experience, between self and other” rests with her investigation of “the art of being ill” (Bailin 1994, 13-14), but in this context it proves useful from an eco-critical perspective and therefore for a rethinking of *Life in the Sick-Room* as an eco-sustainable narrative. No such reading, nor an eco-critical reassessment of Martineau’s work appears to be currently available. To this double aim I shall dedicate the remainder of this study<sup>14</sup>.

Eco-sustainable narratives view art as an integral part of the natural order, thereby challenging the modern separation of culture from nature, and reconfiguring the sometimes hidden connections between the animal and the non-animal worlds, between the observer and the observed nature. Literature, including creative as well as academic writing, is eco-sustainable for as long as it concerns itself with “listening to and seeking for what is secluded, the *oikeion*”, that is to say with “the thing that has not become public, that has not become communicational, that has not become systemic” (Lyotard 2000: 137). Eco-sustainable narratives provide a language to articulate uncharted experiential territories, therefore enabling new ways of comprehending the environment in which we live. As such they represent creative acts of discovery, or re-discovery through which we “come forth into the light of things”<sup>15</sup>, and thus we see and understand them anew. It may be contended that any piece of literary work potentially lends itself to eco-critical interpretation, and indeed Green Studies hold a distinctively broad theoretical approach that can be “re-defined daily by the actual practice of [...] literary scholars around the world” (Slavic 2000: 160). The apparent lack of a dominant doctrine accounts for its early dismissal within academia, but in recent times environmental studies have been acknowledged their capacity to offer valuable critical tools. Accordingly, in the present context, *Life in the Sick-room* is revisited with a view to showing

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treated at home [...] by a doctor whose professional qualifications resided as much in his relations to the family [...] and personal charm, as in his technical skill and knowledge” (Bailin 1994: 9).

<sup>13</sup> The literary sick-room thus becomes an arena where cultural paradoxes can be mediated. It is here that women can “go beyond one’s designated and restrictive social role”. As Bailin contends, “in works by women of the period, illness occurs when the desire to reject the characteristics and narrow range of functions considered appropriate for women threatens a profound loss of identity, whereas to accept them conventionally defined would result in a return to frustration and self-attenuation” (Bailin 1994: 27-28, my italics). Martineau’s account does not explicitly claim for a room of one’s own, nevertheless it succeeds in constructing a narrative from which her feelings, aspirations and frustrations can be articulated.

<sup>14</sup> The eco-critical reading offered in this study does encompass aspects of eco-feminism, which can be traced across Martineau’s work and are well worth investigating, but remain beyond the present scope.

<sup>15</sup> Line 15 in “The Tables Turned”, a much-quoted poem by Wordsworth (1798): “Come forth in to the light of things/ And let Nature be your teacher” (Coleridge & Wordsworth 1969: 105).

how Martineau's language and concerns are consonant with issues that have become the object and subject of relatively recent eco-scholarship. I shall argue that Martineau's volume represents a creative act of discovery and self-discovery, which explores, articulates and gives prominence to the interdependence of the animal and the non-animal worlds while also revealing how invalidism puts one's identity on trial, facilitating self-scrutiny for the author as well as her reader.

Emerging as a focal point in Martineau's holistic aesthetics, nature becomes pivotal to such a dual process, and while the writer does not deliberately convey an ecological message as such, she certainly gives nature a significant place. In *Life in the Sick-Room* the term is used to indicate "the essential quality and character of something"; and most importantly "the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both", and "the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings" (Williams 1983: 219). Raymond Williams' conceptualisation of the "perhaps most complex word in the language" indicates the inextricable link between nature and culture (211); in other words it shows that "notions of nature are socially constructed and determine our perception of our direct experiences, which, in turn, determine our direct communication about them" (Gifford 2000: 174). In this respect, an eco-critical reading of *Life in the Sick-Room* evaluates Martineau's uses of nature as time, place and culture specific, at once reflecting and being a reflection of her status as a middle-class invalid writer in nineteenth-century Britain. At the same time, a rethinking of this particular mid-Victorian sick-room narrative as eco-sustainable sheds light on the legacy of Martineau's belief in nature's social and cultural value and how this affected her pursuit of education on the spiritual and psychological dimensions of chronic suffering.

The first signs of a gradual shift towards environmental awareness can be traced in works predating *Life in the Sick-Room*. As early as 1832, Martineau had published *Illustrations of Political Economy*, an experimental 9-volume study in which the will to narrate underlies a specific didactic aim: Martineau deals with a difficult subject – Thomas Carlyle's "dismal science" – that is of a predominantly male-upper-middle class interest, and she makes it widely accessible to the general public (to include both women and the lower classes) through the popular medium of the literary short story. *Illustrations* brings together 25 tales, small anecdotes, the first of which, interestingly for us here, bears the title of "Life in the Wilds" and which is followed by "Hill and the Valley" (Martineau 1836). Both place significant attention to the necessity of interaction between man and nature. Similarly, Martineau's first novel, *Deerbrook* (1839), a realist tale *à la Austen*, essentially recounts a story of rural life whose protagonists are immersed in beautiful scenery. The 1841 children classic *Feats on the Fjord* further displays the skilfully "picturesque pen"<sup>16</sup> of the author, and her ability to depict and share with readers breathtaking descriptions of the Norwegian landscape, with its lagoons, the walls of rock, the wildlife, the midnight sun, the "charming crystalline" beauty of the Arctic circle (Martineau 1841)<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous review. 1848. Eastern Life, Past and Present. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, August: 185-189. Quoted in Martineau (2006: 23).

<sup>17</sup> For a critical assessment of the tale see K. Walchester, 2014. *Feats on the Fjord* was the first and remains one of the few among Martineau's texts to have been translated in Italian. Cf. Martineau 1925.



Time and the sick-room experience reinforced Martineau's faith in the healing force of nature, and although she retained a Romantic and sometimes idealised conception of it as a "kind of universal home" (Hazlitt 1970: 7), she eventually came to conceive of nature as a "way of thinking"<sup>18</sup>. A Unitarian like Martineau, Hazlitt was influenced by the Necessarian doctrine, or physical determinism, according to which nature is determined by universal laws<sup>19</sup>. This possibly gave Martineau a new method of interpretation of reality in that when "incidents occur, they produce effects, and [that those] effects should be understood". The notion that "all action might be determined by antecedent causes, but one's own actions and discriminations were *necessary links* in the chain of cause and effect"<sup>20</sup>, may have nurtured Martineau's belief in the interconnectedness of *all* beings – animal and non-animal – and the possibility of recovering universal harmony<sup>21</sup>. However she came to that resolution, there is little doubt that her view of nature as an "immortal wealth" was a consequence of her infirmity. Forced to spend her days and nights within her sick-room, she had come to believe that "disobedience to the laws of nature" would manifest itself in the ill body; therefore healing was a matter of 'redress', literally, of reconnecting and re-harmonising with nature (Martineau 1877: 441)<sup>22</sup>. It is not fortuitous that these ideas recur most evidently in works written in or after 1844, the year when Martineau "found herself under the hands of a Mesmerist", and like many at the time she placed her trust in an unorthodox medical practice that pursued and claimed to restore harmony between man and nature<sup>23</sup>. In *Dawn Island*, a

<sup>18</sup> The expression owes to Americans Roderick Nash and Max Oelschlaeger, and it is used by Gifford to define nature (Gifford 2000: 174). Martineau's debt to Romanticism has been debated by several scholars (eg. Todd 2002; Hutcheon 2003; James 2009; Harding 2009) and it can be witnessed in references to Romantic literature in *Life in the Sick-Room* (cf. annotated version of Martineau's Essays, Frawley 2003). In this respect, it can be argued with Harding that Martineau "carried forward the *essential Romantic debates* about the self and the universe, the citizen and the polis, gender and political rights for women, into a more populated, industrialized, complicated, and globally interconnected world" (2009: 28, my italics).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy, online reference: [http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405106795\\_chunk\\_g978140510679515\\_ss1-42#citation](http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405106795_chunk_g978140510679515_ss1-42#citation) (consulted on 27/07/2017). On the impact of Unitarianism upon Martineau's life and thinking see Hutcheon 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Linda H. Peterson. 1986. Martineau's Autobiography: the Feminine Debate over Self-Interpretation. *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press (consulted on 20/07/2017) <http://www.victorianweb.org/genre/peterson/5.html#nec>. In her *Autobiography* Martineau claims that "All the best minds that I know are Necessarians; all indeed which are qualified to discuss the [religious] subject at all" (Martineau 1877: 110).

<sup>21</sup> Martineau believed in the existence not of the individual, but rather of a "man within society, who is subject to the eternal and never-changing laws of nature" (Conti Odorisio 2003: 331).

<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere in the *Autobiography* Martineau writes that a "new obedience to a new law of nature raised me up, and sent me forth into the world again" (Martineau 1877: 443). The reference is to the practice of mesmerism.

<sup>23</sup> In his thesis, *Dissertatio physicomedita de planetarum influx* (1766) Franz Anton Mesmer investigated what he termed "animal gravity", that is to say the "influence of celestial bodies on humans", a disruption of which would cause disease. The healing practice that he developed – mesmerism – sought to restore "the natural harmony of magnetic fluid in the patient's body" (Roberts 2002: 122-123). See also R. Darnton. 1984 [1968]. *La fin des lumières. Le mesmerisme et la Révolution*. Paris: Perrin, 18 (quoted in Conti Odorisio 2003: 150); R. K. Webb. 1960. Tynemouth: Mesmeric Wonders. *Harriet Martineau. A Radical Victorian*, chapter 8. London: Heineman, 226-253. For Martineau's own account, see: H. Martineau, 1845. Letter I (12 Nov. 1844). *Letters on Mesmerism*. London: Edward Moxon; Martineau 2003: 242 and Martineau 1877: 490.

short novel completed in 1845, she explores the disruption of their accord in the opening and closing chapters, entitled respectively “Nature and Man at War”, and “Nature and Man at Peace”. Asserting the importance of making contact with the “unfathomable quietness” of the sky and “the transparency of the atmosphere”, Martineau persuasively told her readers how “the leap and gush of the mountain streams lulled the senses of the observer”, and granted him, or her, an incomparable “abode of peace” (Martineau 1845a)<sup>24</sup>.

By that time Martineau was already a secluded patient with a strong sense of nature’s healing powers. Writing became a way of coming to terms with a taxing condition, both physical and psychological, literally easing the burden of her confinement – may that be idleness, boredom or fear – and giving her a mission to accomplish – to educate her readers. She built her discourse around notions of fellowship and community – an imagined community she calls “the whole mind of society”, which includes both the sick and the healthy (Martineau 1877: 457). In the Dedication of *Life in the Sick-Room*, for instance, Martineau addresses a nameless recipient – “some fellow-sufferer who had attained these experiences before me or with me” – aiming for “the comfort of companionship” and the “fellowship” of anybody who is in the same circumstance, and whose existence, directly or not, is affected by the reality of illness<sup>25</sup>. To her special readers and for them, Martineau tailored her prose as she set out to illustrate the “perils” and “pains” of being ill, unveiling, at the same time, the “gains” and the “sweets of invalidism”<sup>26</sup>.

Negotiating opposites, *Life in the Sick-Room* brought the *oikeion* onto the public domain, openly and for many unexpectedly, thereby challenging the separation between those two realms through the generative (and regenerative) power of invalidism<sup>27</sup>. Martineau’s readers could (imaginatively) enter the private space of her sick-room, and from that privileged area they would gain a different perspective onto their medical condition. The use of a permeating ‘rhetoric of seeing’ is highly significant in this respect. In the text, acts of seeing en-

<sup>24</sup> Repr. in H. Martineau, *L’isola dell’Aurora*, cit., pp. 79-80. In the introduction to this volume, Marcella Romeo offers an interesting reading of Martineau’s descriptions and “picturesque pen”. The exotic landscape of the Island as a heavenly uncontaminated place, a “safe abode” for the traveller, allows for the author’s discussion of colonial violence, war and alterity. See especially pp. 21-24.

<sup>25</sup> The dedicatee was possibly Elizabeth Barrett [Browning], herself an invalid, whom Martineau had never met (Postlewaite 1989: 601) but with whom she exchanged letters while in Tynemouth. From a narrative perspective the omission of Barrett’s name reflects Martineau’s pursuit of fellowship of her readers.

<sup>26</sup> Indicatively essays no. 9 and 10 bear the titles of “Some Perils and Pains of Invalidism”, and “Some Gains and Sweets of Invalidism”. Class and gender distinctions have little prominence in Martineau’s invalid essays, though her sick-room model was clearly accessible to upper and middle class patients having equal privileges (private nursing, and a dedicated room within the domestic realm). As regards gender, it has been observed by several Martineau scholars that “she was less distinctively affected by her sex than any other, male or female, of her generation”, to the point of being defined as a non-feminist, if not a “masculine” writer (Margaret Oliphant, cited in Postlewaite 1989: 584). A dedicated eco-feminist reassessment of her work is worth pursuing; but for the present purposes, and without trying to de-gender Martineau’s invalidism, nor her narrative strategies, I shall concentrate exclusively on aspects of healing as an expression of her ecological thinking.

<sup>27</sup> Martineau conceives of the sick-room as a place where cooperation can be achieved once constructed notions of invalidism have been exposed and deconstructed. A rethinking of nature, for her necessary to healthy living, stems from a radical rethinking of the concept of nature as a whole.



able Martineau to establish “the connection between invalids’ opportunities to observe and their propensity to understand”; most importantly they provide her “with a basis for philosophical understanding” (Frawley 2004: 226). Unlimited access to observation ultimately enabled her to confront and expose the power and peril of socially constructed notions of invalidism, and to promote among her readers the notion that the mind of the sick person is powerful and it is for such reason that “ideas are essentially good” (Martineau 1844: 47)<sup>28</sup>. Faced with the dangers of “becoming inured” (this is the eloquent and cautionary title of the seventh essay), Martineau’s readers were invited to re-consider their perception of what invalids *really* need, and in that context they learnt to value the place nature could, and should have, in the life of the sick. This particular idea is fully examined in the essay entitled “Nature to the Invalid”. Adding value and originality to Martineau’s account, the third section in the volume is exemplary of the tone and mode of the collection as a whole, while also representing a precious example of an eco-critical narrative.

The essay is divided into sub-paragraphs, each of them contributing to establish Martineau’s recommendation that nature *ought to* be given to the terminally ill. As the title suggests the author contemplates what nature means *to* (i.e. for) the invalid, consequently posing as necessary for the sick person an unmediated contact with nature on the basis of Martineau’s personal experience and convictions. Here, as elsewhere in the collection, the writer shifts from using the authorial/authoritative voice to prescribe actions that are to be taken, to launching a communal plea, alongside her fellow sufferers, for those among her readers who are “healthy and happy”. The opening is a dense and peremptory statement worth citing in full:

When an invalid is under sentence of disease for life, it becomes *a duty of first-rate importance* to select a *proper place of abode*. This is often overlooked; and a sick prisoner goes on to live where he lived before for no other reason than he lived there before (Martineau 1844: 43, my italics).

There is a rift between the world of the invalid, to which Martineau belongs and on whose behalf she is writing, and that of the healthy, whose duty – she warns – is to provide a “proper abode” for the terminally ill. The writer’s priority is to address both, and to inform the healthy reader that it is also his, or her, responsibility to help create an adequate sick-room. Lending itself to multiple readings, not least considering Martineau’s construction of a readership she aims to console and educate, this passage can also be looked at from an eco-critical perspective, that is to say as functional to the author’s message that an invalid’s exposure to landscape is a uniquely redemptive experience, therapeutic for the spirit and the body alike. By advocating as necessary a radical architectural transformation of the sick-room<sup>29</sup>, Martineau anticipates what Terry Gifford would term, a century later, a “semiology

<sup>28</sup> “The power of ideas in the sickroom” is the title of the eighth essay (Martineau 1844: 155-175).

<sup>29</sup> This is what Martineau did as soon as she moved into her sick-room, whose interiors were redecorated and adapted to suit her requirements. Her innovative view was in stark contrast with the then current medical characterizations of the sick-room, an example of which is found in Anthony Todd Thompson’s influential text *Domestic Management of the Sick-Room* (1841). Cf. Winter 1995: 608, and 608 n. 51.

of nature”, which “keeps us sane and reminds us that we are animals” (Gifford 2000: 174). The “proper abode” must be surrounded by a natural landscape, its windows should overlook “the widest or the most beautiful view that can be had [...] *We should have* the widest expanse of sky, for night scenery [...] the widest expanse of land or water, for the sake of a sense of liberty” (Martineau 1844: 45, my italics). Martineau lets her reader know that she has chosen the sea as “the best kind of view for a sick prisoner’s window to command”, and that “a telescope may be called in” since this would really make “*the difference to us*” (Martineau 1844: 45, my italics). From the opening impersonal subject sentence, the writer’s perspective shifts to the plural *we* – hers becomes a collective demand. The waving of the trees, the ever-changing aspects of mountains are good and beautiful, she maintains, but there is nothing as “life-like” as the “going forth and return of ships, the passage of fleets, the never-ending variety of a fishery”. An antidote to the conscriptions of invalidism, motion of the sea – the “perpetual shifting of objects” caused by the waves – would defy the stillness and gloom of life in the sick-room (Martineau 1844: 45-46).

Having requested ‘nature’ for the invalid, she proceeds to give a practical definition of it through a meticulous description of what she sees from her window. A combination of a highly evocative language suggests the supreme beauty of a landscape stretching across the miles in which plants, rocks, the sea, the beach, humans, and even the rail-road coexist in full harmony:

I survey the harbour and all its traffic, the view extending from the lighthouses far to the right, to a horizon of sea to the left. Beyond the harbour lies another county [...] where there are frequent wrecks – too interesting for an invalid – [...] and] I watch troops of boys flying their kites; lovers and friends [...]; the sportsman with his gun and dog; the washerwomen [...]. Behind the village and the heath, stretches the rail-road; and I watch the train triumphantly careering along the level road, and puffing forth its steam above edges and groups of trees [...] till it’s lost between two heights, which at last bound my view (Martineau 1844: 46-47).

This idyllic scenario is what Martineau had recreated for herself in her Tynemouth abodes; however romanticised and possibly sanitised (neither the rail-road nor the gun interfere with her picturesque account) the landscape she portrays is never “flat and still” as Conti Odorisio maintains<sup>30</sup>, but is rather “full of life”, inspirational to the author, and wholly beneficial to the sick. The telescope surveys the environment outside, capturing trees, birds, bees, horses, the moon, the sea, the wind, the sociable farmer and the sociable horseman, vivid images which Martineau’s readers are made to share, as if they were looking out of the same window. The writer’s idea of a regenerative shared infirmity culminates with a unique moment of interaction between the observer and the observed nature where “the white horse [makes] his progress visible [...] through the dusk”, writes Martineau. And “if the

<sup>30</sup> For Conti Odorisio it was for such reason that Martineau ‘abandoned’ the Lake District once she had been cured (2003: 148). In fact, she left only temporarily the place she considered as her homeplace, and where she would die in 1876.

question arises which has most of the gossip spirit, *he or I*, there is no shame in the answer" (49). This experience is "amusing" and therefore "salutary" since, in her view, "it carries the spirit of the sick prisoner abroad into the open air, and among country people" (49). The pictorial quality of Martineau's prose betrays her operation within the text and by way of the text itself: the performance of an act of seeing enables a communicative act in which the author summons, almost ritualistically conjuring up, the kind of *nature* she aims to give to *the invalid*. The process develops further in the paragraph that follows where (visual) contact is established between the inside and the outside world of the sick-room:

I believe that *my interest in these spectacles of Nature has created a new regard to them in others*. I see a looking out for the rising moon among the neighbours, who have possessed the same horizon-line all their lives, but did not know its value until *they saw* what it is to me. I observe the children from the cottage [...] when *they see me* on the watch in the window (55, *my italics*).

The gap between the (narrating) self and her other is challenged, the observer becomes the observed and "a new regard" for nature has been created "in others". This outcome is in keeping with the Green Studies agenda, and if, as Jhan Hochman has it, eco-criticism aims to foreground "potential effects representation might have on cultural attitudes and social practices which, in turn affect nature itself" (Hochman 2000: 187), the relevance of Martineau's words above is unequivocal. To put it differently, the exercise of writing becomes an act of creative discovery that pursues a reconnection with nature and obtains sympathy towards it, also becoming a means to spiritual healing and moral edification for all. Emphatically, Martineau poses two rhetorical, nonetheless provoking questions: "How is it that so many prisoners are *needlessly deprived* of all these sights?"; "How is it that the long-suffering sick, already *deprived* of so much, are ever *needlessly debarred* from natural and renovating pleasures like these?" (Martineau 1844: 71, 73, *my italics*). As the secluded writer reflects on the "renovating" and "recreating" power of landscape watching, she also discovers that life would not be worth living unless one can enjoy nature: the healthy and the happy take it for granted, but invalids learn to "feel an interest [for it] which [they] should otherwise not dream of" (49)<sup>31</sup>. Nature is beautiful all year round, and it is "meant to abound to all" (63), she reiterates, confident that it can nurse "one's health of soul", and give the onlooker a "cordial for future sickly hours" (56). Having illustrated the "unequalled refreshments" nature affords to "the thirst" of an invalid's soul (44, 54), Martineau admits to its "drawbacks" and "set-offs" (which are nevertheless "salutary on the whole", 50-52), and thus describes a typical stormy day: "the horror of the wind is great"; the sight from the window is "omi-

<sup>31</sup> Years later, another eminent invalid, Virginia Woolf, would reflect on the way becoming ill heightened her sympathy towards nature: "Let us examine the rose – she wrote in an essay entitled "On Being Ill" – We have seen it so often flowering in bowls, connected it so often with beauty in its prime, that we have forgotten how it stands, still and steady, throughout an entire afternoon in the earth. It preserves a demeanour of perfect dignity and self possession. The suffusion of its petals is of inimitable rightness" (Woolf 2008: 105). To Martineau Woolf acknowledged the merit of paving the way for women entering the writing profession like herself.

nous" and "painful", man is helpless against the fury of the sea. On such days the sick-room truly becomes a haven.

The closing paragraphs introduce the concept of love as another gift of nature to the invalid. Martineau depicts her relationship as a *liaison* proper which implies desire and grievance, and which is curiously, yet significantly, defined in economical terms as a "property":

I have often smiled in detecting in myself this *sense of property* [...] in becoming aware of a sort of resentment, of feeling of personal grievance when the sky is not propitious; when I have no benefit of the moon for several nights together, though the malice of the clouds [...]. I have a *sense of property* too in the larks which nestle in all the furrows of the down [...] If the yellow butterflies do not come to my flowerbox in the sunny noon, I feel myself wronged (Martineau 1844: 55-57, my italics).

Martineau's "sense of property" is not based on ownership, it is never selfish, nor is it exploitative of nature, but rather reflects the writer's sense of duty towards creatures which she sees as 'careless', and which she longs to protect and "to warn that they must not reckon yet on spring" (Martineau 1844: 57). This is a distinctive mothering attitude which adds to the delight and sensual response seen at the start of the collection, and which is fully coherent with Martineau's pre-occupation for her fellow sufferers. The epilogue is an exhortation to them and to the healthy reader to "watch", "observe" and "mark the value of presents" nature unconditionally gives (73-74). And there is also an expression of gratitude to travel writers – Christopher North (1785-1854) most prominently – whose narratives are a consoling to the soul and nourishing to the imagination of the invalid reader: "He has recreated us [...] and opened our prison-doors" (61-62). Martineau thinks of the Scottish explorer not simply as a capable author but rather as someone to emulate so she can lead her own readers "over mountain and moor, lake and lea, and [drop them] again on [their] beds, refreshed and soothed, to dream at least of having felt the long-lost sensation of health once more" (62). Her yearning for nature is somehow revolutionary, not merely contemplative, possibly an anticipation of the kind of "caring economy" advocated by Riane Eisler about a hundred and fifty years later. Speaking in favour of an eco-sustainable cultural model based on partnership, Eisler envisions a society in which "human needs and capacities are nurtured, our natural habitat is conserved, and our great potential for care and creativity is supported" (Eisler 2015: 13). Her words resonate with Martineau's analogous "claim to Nature's nursing", and with her notion of nature as a communal immortal wealth, a resource to be discovered, shared, enjoyed and protected – ultimately as a way of thinking. This "method", Martineau believed, could work well and it could well "be made a system" (Martineau 1844: 33).

"Any full history of the uses of nature would be a history of a large part of human thought", as Williams contends (Williams 1983: 221), and in this sense *Life in the Sick-Room* represents a precious example of mid-Victorian invalid literature in which the observation and the re-discovery of nature becomes crucial to self-scrutiny, to the genesis of a new self and to the making of environmental consciousness. Liberating the invalid from the physical confines of the sick-room, by way of a visually and spiritually active engagement with nature, Martineau insists on the necessity to build and fortify the link between the animal

and the non-animal worlds, between the observer and the observed nature, ultimately challenging the rift between them and achieving – however imaginatively – full harmony. Her conception of nature’s immortal wealth, the need to re-connect with it, to observe it and be observed by it challenges socially constructed notions of nature while also undermining socially constructed notions of invalidism typical of her time. Martineau enjoyed privileges that other fellow sufferers did not – her social class, for instance, and the advantages of being a popular public persona from a Unitarian (Dissenting, free-thinking, progressive) cultural milieu, whose “business in life was [...] to speak with absolute freedom [what she] thought and had learned” (Martineau 1877: 120). These aspects underlie *Life in the Sick-Room*, a narrative by a long-term invalid who was “qualified” to speak by “the experience of years” (1844: 32). Writing helped her create a sense of shared infirmity for herself, but it also enabled the creation of a shared sense of responsibility towards invalids and invalidism on the part of her readers. Nature was crucial to that design and to Martineau’s inclusive narrative strategy. In this respect she was a voice ahead of her time, and today she can be read effectively through the lens of eco-criticism. The term, as noted, refers broadly to a theoretical approach towards creative and academic literary works that may not be explicitly or deliberately ‘environmental’, but nevertheless bear ecological implications, committing themselves to our present dissociation from nature, and investigating the place of readers as it is implied within the narratives themselves. Accordingly, this study revisits Martineau’s invalid essays and suggests the eco-stainable potential of their message, while also asserting the cultural value of a lesser known text and the importance of a mutual contribution of literary and scholarly works in our contemporary quest for a new politics of solidarity and environmental consciousness.

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