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Romantic without Borders

Tracing Emotional Intensity in Helen Maria Williams'

Julia (1790) and *A Tour in Switzerland* (1798)

MA in Advanced English Studies: Literature and Culture

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ABSTRACT

The work of Helen Maria Williams (1761–1827) was widely read by her contemporaries. However, compared to other writers of the same period, her texts have received less critical attention at the present time. She has essentially been regarded as an author of Sensibility in the last three decades of feminist scholarship. Her *Letters written in France* (1790) record political events and commentary on the French Revolution and have placed Williams in a tradition of radical politics. This dissertation interrogates two of Williams' works that have received scant critical attention: her only novel *Julia* (1790) and her travelogue *Tour in Switzerland* (1798). I am interested in identifying the fluctuations in the representation of intense emotions, which I contend is a characteristic of Helen Maria Williams' style. For this purpose, I have focused on Williams' use of the feminine voice, especially in *Julia*, the description of the perception of nature, and the representation of the experience of the Sublime.

Keywords: women's writing; eighteenth century; sensibility; Romanticism; Helen Maria Williams.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	2
Introduction: Helen Maria Williams and Radical Sensibility	4
Helen Maria Williams' Life and Work	7
Research Question and Outline of the Dissertation.....	14
Chapter 1: Nature and the Individualization of Sensorial Experience in <i>Julia</i> (1790)...	16
1.1. Emotion and Self-knowledge	23
Chapter 2: <i>Tour in Switzerland</i> (1798).....	28
2.1. The Sublime in Nature.....	32
2.2. The Dread of the Sublime and Williams' <i>Conclusion</i>	42
Conclusions	50
References	55
Appendix	61

INTRODUCTION

Helen Maria Williams and Radical Sensibility

Towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write.

Virginia Woolf
A Room of One's Own

Janet Todd, one of the most prolific scholars of eighteenth-century literature, wrote in *The Sign of Angellica* that “although there were still some conventional statements of uneasiness over the woman writer, the professional female author was by the late 1790s pretty much established in England” (1989: 218). She described the social processes that allowed women to choose writing as a vehicle for female self-expression. Todd was also one of the first to draw attention to the Romanticised elements that were to be found in women’s fiction well before the date of 1798 with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, generally considered to have inaugurated the English Romantic movement. In her book *Sensibility: An Introduction* (1986) Todd sought to distinguish eighteenth century sensibility from nineteenth-century Victorian sentimentality, and acknowledged that the former implied more than a mid-late eighteenth-century interest in representing internal subjectivity through external bodily signs. Markman Ellis, writing on sensibility and the history of the novel, remarked that even though “sensibility and the sentimental were a matter of informed and energetic debate in the second half of the eighteenth century, no consensus was reached” (1996:5). Sentiment was regarded back in 1785 by the editors of *The Universal Magazine* as a “refinement of moral feeling, which animates us in performing the dictates of reason, and introduces many graces and

decorums to the great duties of morality” (289)¹. But his definition is provided in an article entitled “On the Difference between Romantic and Sentimental Characters”, which indicates an awareness of a difference between ‘Romantic’ and ‘Sentimental’, however unstable and fluctuating these terms might have been. Miriam Wallace, in her lucid study about the conceptual borders between the Enlightenment, the Age of Johnson, the Age of Sensibility and the Romantic Spirit, points out that these often overlap when referring to literature produced by eighteenth-century authors because there is no clear demarcation between reason and emotion. “While the sensibilities evident in the works of Richardson, Fielding, Haywood, Smollett, Sterne, and Mackenzie differ in important ways from each other, there are also continuities from these writers through Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, and William Godwin –even Wordsworth and P.B. Shelley” (5). Wallace suggests that thinking in terms of a ‘long eighteenth century’ offers scholars the opportunity to understand the complex shaping of ideas about authorship and literature in early modernity, especially when the scope of the canon is enlarged with the inclusion of women writers. This challenges, according to Wallace, the “overdetermined versions of Romanticism from M.H. Abrams or E.P. Thompson” (6) with their inspirational notions of emotion, the Sublime, and the representation of the poor working classes. If eighteenth-century writers share patterns of continuity and change in these and some other concepts that have been claimed as intrinsically Romantic, can we argue, as Wallace does, that “the Romantic sublime may be the fruition of eighteenth-century sensibility?” (6). The question implies a development throughout the century in the representation and conceptualization of emotion, from David Hume’s notion of a sensibility that is moral to the amorality of intense passions in gothic literature. At the same time, where eighteenth-century

¹ As quoted by Markman Ellis (1996) in Chapter 1. Anon. “On the Difference between Romantic and Sentimental Characters”. In *The Universal Magazine*, 77 (December 1785), pp. 288-89.

sensibility used bodily signs to understand subjectivity, many representations of the Romantic Sublime seem to do the same but inverting the process: the intense mixture of feelings, or their intimate nature, precludes their bodily expression and the writer-poet looks outside into nature.

The poetic work of some women writers of the period offers a testing ground for these fluctuations, regardless of their political affinities, social class or personal circumstance. Female authors who wrote in the last decades of the eighteenth century often faced the animosity of colleagues and critics by virtue of their sex, especially (but not exclusively) if they challenged institutions or espoused radical political ideas ‘imported’ from France. The poet and curate Richard Polwhele’s harshly criticized the work of those women writers that defended revolutionary political ideas in ‘The Unsex’d Females’. Polwhele, loosely associated with the writer and philanthropist Hannah More, was referring to women like Mary Wollstonecraft or Helen Maria Williams in particular. Williams may not have received so much critical attention as Wollstonecraft, but she was a prolific and well-known literary figure in her lifetime. In Mark Ledden’s words she was “a literary star of the first magnitude in the 1780s” (1944-5: 37). She was complimented on her writing by Elizabeth Montagu, Samuel Johnson, William Wordsworth, Mary Wollstonecraft, Hester Piozzi or Alexander von Humboldt. She exchanged correspondence with Wollstonecraft and they met several times in Paris. Later on, when Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley travelled to France, she paid a visit to her. The young William Wordsworth admired Williams’ work and even dedicated a poem to her, entitled ‘Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress’ (1787). Wordsworth showed a repeated interest in making her acquaintance and even asked his friends twice for letters of introduction.

Helen Maria Williams' Life and Work

Helen Maria Williams was born in 1761 in London of a Scottish mother and a Welsh father. Her father died the following year and the rest of the family moved to Berwick-upon-Tweed, where she was raised in the Presbyterian tradition. In 1781, at the age of 20, she moved back to London. Williams and her family were members of the congregation of the Reverend Dr Andrew Kippis, who praised her poetry and introduced her to literary circles in London. In 1782, when she was just 20 years old, she published her first work *Edwin and Eltruda*, which was signed by 'a young lady'. This was followed by *Ode to the Peace* in 1783 and *Peru* in 1784, dedicated to Elizabeth Montagu. With this work, Williams began to place her name on the title page, which shows that she had gained literary respectability by then. These three first works already show her interest in political causes. *Edwin and Eltruda* is set during the American War of Independence, while *Peru* portrays the sufferings of the Peruvian people at the time of the conquest of America and the narrator criticizes the brutality of the Spanish conquerors. She overtly expressed her political ideas in her following work, *A Poem on the Bill Lately Passed for Regulating the Slave Trade* (1788), where she shows her allegiance to the anti-slavery movement. Her works received the backlash of several relevant literary figures of the time, such as Horace Walpole, who considered female poets unfeminine (Kennedy, 2002: 31). She was nevertheless acclaimed to a greater extent, as can be inferred from the large number of subscribers –some 1500– of her next publication, *Poems* (1786). In 1790 she published her first and only novel *Julia, a Novel Interspersed with some Poetical Pieces* (1790) which was inspired by Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761). This novel does not address political issues directly, but it shows Williams' progressive ideas. The novel includes a poem "La Bastille: A Vision", which is representative of Williams' interest in the French

Revolution, to the extent that she would travel to France that same year. Upon her return, she recounted her experiences in her first series of *Letters Written in France*, showing her support for the revolutionary cause. After several trips between France and England between 1790 and 1792, she finally established herself in France accompanied by her family (her mother and sister). In Paris, she enjoyed significant recognition as a British writer and participated in revolutionary political activities. From 1790 to 1819 she published several volumes in England of her account of the events that she witnessed in France. She met John Stone in Paris, who became her friend and companion until his death in 1818. Their relationship was not welcomed by Williams' friends in England because they never got married. During the Jacobins' rise to power, Williams was imprisoned for a month in 1793. She had publicly manifested her inclination towards the Girondine movement, and she was also a suspect of being a spy for the British. In order to escape from political persecution, she travelled with John Stone and her family to Switzerland in 1794, and they stayed there for six months. She kept a diary of her trips that was published in 1798 with the title *A Tour in Switzerland*. Adding to her original works, she also translated Bernardin de Saint Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* and Von Humboldt's scientific texts. She was granted French citizenship in 1817 and died ten years later in Paris. Although her output as a writer was significant, her influence waned over the decades.

In 1930 Lionel Woodward wrote a dissertation entitled *Una Adherente Anglaise de la Revolution Française: Helene-Maria Williams et Ses Amis* (1930), which updated much of the biographical data available on Williams and placed the emphasis on her political writings and social connections. When Williams published her *Letters Written in France* in 1790 as a response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (and within months of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of*

Men), the poet Anna Seward praised her efforts in several of her letters addressed to Williams, whereas the more conservative critic Laetitia Hawkins challenged her reputation as a writer of sentiment in her *Letters on the Female Mind* (1790). William Hayley, who had previously praised Williams as a “muse” of sensibility, did not approve of her “departure into more masculine realms of discourse” (Barnard 2009:73). Williams’ incursion into political thought has dominated the critical appreciation of her literary output, almost to the exclusion of other considerations on subject matters and style. Given her extensive production, and the fact that she was not an obscure writer in her lifetime, Williams has not been the focus of much critical inquiry compared to other of her contemporary women writers. It was not until the late 1980s and 1990s when the writings of Helen Maria Williams began to receive critical attention thanks to the work of feminist scholars who undertook the task of recovering texts written by women. This was the case of Dale Spender, who mentions Helen Maria Williams in her book *Mothers of the Novel* (1986). Spender includes Williams in a list but she does not examine her texts. As mentioned before, another feminist scholar, Janet Todd, discusses Williams’s work in *The Sign of Angellica* (1989) and edited the complete *Letters from France* in 1975. A paperback edition was subsequently edited in 1999 by Neil Fraistat and Susan Lanser (and to this date, *Letters from France* is the only modern and printed edition of Williams’ work). Todd is interested in Williams’ accounts of the French Revolution, and she is presented as another example of a woman who supported the revolutionary cause. Anne K. Mellor includes Williams in *Romanticism and Gender* (1993) and Elizabeth A. Fay’s in *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism* (1998). These last three works tend to discuss Williams in relation to Mary Wollstonecraft, but her texts are not dealt with in much detail. Most of the scholarship devoted to Williams pays attention mainly to her *Letters From France* and her subsequent chronicles of the

French Revolution. This is the case of *Women, Writing and Revolution 1790-1827* (1993) by Gary Kelly. Steven Blackmore also analyses Williams' depiction of the revolutionary events in *Crisis in representation : Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, and the rewriting of the French Revolution* (1997). Other articles that deal with Williams' narrative of the French Revolution are "Public Loathing, Private Thoughts: Historical Representation in Helen Maria Williams' Letters from France" (1996), by Jack Frutchman Jr., Jacqueline Leblanc's "Politics and Commercial Sensibility in Helen Maria Williams' Letters from France" (1997), or "Travelling hopefully: Helen Maria Williams and the feminine discourse of sensibility" (2000) by Chris Jones. Both articles study how Williams makes use of the expression of sensibility to recount revolutionary events. For its part, Eleanor Ty devotes a chapter to Williams in *Unsex'd Revolutionaries: five women novelists of the 1790's* (1993) but she chooses to provide a feminist interpretation of the novel *Julia*, rather than focusing on her political writings. Mark Ledden analyses Williams' self-representation in her work focusing mainly on her early poems and *Julia*, and asserts her literary output as Romantic. In 2011, Louise Joy published her article "Emotions in Translation: Helen Maria Williams and "Beauties Peculiar to the English Language", which analyses Williams' adaptation of Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* and her translation of *Paul et Virginie* (1787). The only monograph devoted to her is Deborah Kennedy's *Helen Maria Williams and the Age of Revolution* (2002). Kennedy's main contribution is biographical and contextual. She offers a complete background of Williams' literary, cultural and personal influences and defines her main thematic interests. Particularly in her first chapter, Kennedy takes stock of Williams' tensions between the literature of sensibility and romanticism, but she does not elaborate on this line of research.

Recent criticism of Helen Maria Williams has indistinctly defined her work as either literature of sensibility or ‘pre-Romantic’, however ambiguous the latter term might be. Gary Kelly’s analysis of Williams as a writer of sensibility acknowledges that “her work suggests the revolutionary potential of sensibility” (1993: 31). Chris Jones in his article “Radical Sensibility” (1993) includes her as one of the members of the movement that he defines. Jacqueline LeBlanc presents her as a “popular poet and sentimental novelist” and indicates that she “follows the lines of a tradition that includes Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*” (1997: 27). Elizabeth A. Fay includes Helen Maria Williams in the canon of female writing during the Romantic period but specifies that Williams adopts “the role of a sentimental heroine” in her writings (1998: 78). In turn Steven Blakemore identifies her as a “Romantic historian” (1997: 78). For her part, Elizabeth A. Fay presents *Tour in Switzerland* as a Romantic work in “Travel Writing” (2015). There seems to be an agreement that Williams is Romantic because she shared the same ideological and geographical space of what has been established as Romantic and ‘revolutionary’. At the same time, Williams’ work is read as stemming from a tradition of sensibility that she cultivated in her style. This critical instability in locating Williams’ work –compared to other of her contemporaries– drew my curiosity towards her writing, and found that her particular case offers potentially rich areas of inquiry. Delving into Williams’ production is a daunting task: she wrote compulsively and most of her texts –especially those that do not deal with revolutionary France– have been under read and under studied, as Deborah Kennedy herself concedes in her monograph. There is not either a critical consensus in defining the genres that Williams cultivated. She is considered as a poet, a novelist, a travel writer, a chronicler and even a historian. Before opting for a definition of Williams inside a specific literary movement, I will attempt to define these concepts.

Differences between sensibility and sentimentalism are associated with an emphasis on the outward expression of emotions and on the idea that every individual is naturally inclined towards benevolence. Jerome McGann describes it as follows:

Tears are the proper emblem of the literatures of sensibility and sentiment. They mark out a special population who live and move and have their being by affect, through sympathy: men and women of sorrow who are acquainted with grief -responding to it in others, suffering it themselves. Other emblems -blushes, involuntary sighs, swooning, a rapid pulse - expands one's sense of the experience being explored through these literatures. [...] In this kind of writing, the body's elementary and spontaneous mechanisms come to measure persons themselves as well as their social relations. (1996: 7)

This concept was not only applied to literature, it found its way also into philosophy, religion or even science. It is often negatively connoted as a “weakness of thought” that “is not to be analysed by reason of rational debate” (Ellis 1996: 7). Digression, rather than debate, is indeed a feature of the novels of sensibility, but *The Universal Magazine* published in 1778 that “sentiment diffuses universal benevolence. It teaches men to feel for others as for themselves [...] It excites a pleasing sensation in our breast, which if its duration be considered, may be placed among the highest gratification of sense” (quoted in Ellis 1996:7). John Mullan writes that “To possess heightened sensibility is to feel more readily the pleasures and pains of sympathy, to be able to escape self-interest, and therefore be virtuous” (1996: 248). Mirella Agorni, in her study of the representations of Italy in eighteenth-century British women writers, notes that women dominated the literature of sensibility. The term ‘sensibility’ was used to indicate a particular kind of consciousness, “which could be refined and made more responsive not only to internal signals, but also to external ones; in other words those proceeding from the body and from nature respectively” (Agorni 2002: 13). Chris Jones distinguishes a conservative sensibility from a radical one within the literature of sensibility. The former “claimed that man’s feelings were fostered by the associations of traditional society and were its

principal support” (1993: 69). Jones includes Williams in the tradition of radical sensibility, since “[it] continued to trust innate emotional response to provide the basis of a beneficial social order, and embraced a philosophy which proposed to liberate individual energies” (1993:69). Jones’ line of argument notes that the libertarian ideals of the Revolution continued to use the terms of sensibility in their critiques of British institutions, and that radical sensibility was in favour of the French Revolution since it promoted the “liberalization of traditional power relationships” (Jones, 1993: 70). My main line of argument follows on Jones’ reading, but applies it to other texts by Williams before and after her revolutionary texts. Rather than asking whether radical sensibility adapted well to romantic ideals my concern is whether (radical) romanticism implies an appropriation and intensification of sensibility, especially in the Romantic genre per excellence: poetry. The difference is one of detail, but it is not devoid of significance. Stating that sensibility adapted well to romanticism privileges the importance of the latter as a ground-breaking intellectual movement. Whereas acknowledging that Romanticism made use of or adapted a previous tradition of representing emotion reinstates sensibility as a meaningful precedent.

Establishing the borders of Romanticism as a literary movement is not devoid of theoretical pitfalls either, and every school and scholar of Romanticism will provide his definition and demarcation of it. The *OED* defines it as a “movement in the arts and literature which originated in the late 18th century, emphasizing inspiration, subjectivity and the primacy of the individual”. McGann notes that, in the 20th century, “criticism has managed to incorporate romanticism into the (classicist) idea of ‘tradition’, it has continued to obscure the naïve-and-sentimental heritage bequeathed to all later culture by the eighteenth century” (McGann, 1996: 2). The boundaries between the literature of sensibility and Romanticism are not clear-cut, and even some authors such as Julie

Ellison have located Romanticism as a part of sensibility. Ellison considers sensibility “a culture that begins earlier and extends later than any chronology of romanticism, a culture of which romanticism, I now believe, forms one episode” (1994: 228).

Research Question and Outline of the Dissertation

Helen Maria Williams often features in the critical debates that address sensibility and Romanticism, but most of the times in relation to wider considerations about women’s writing. Feminist criticism tends to include her in the canon of women's writing during this period, which is still being defined. Although I assume this theoretical line, I am interested in studying Williams not only as belonging to a group. I believe that her contribution deserves a greater individualization of her work. For instance, in the chapter devoted to “Essays and Political Writing” in the *Cambridge Companion to Women Writing in the Romantic Period*, just published in 2015, Williams’ contribution to the political debate of her time is overlooked and she is not mentioned in the chapter. While acknowledging the significance of this writing for Williams, my dissertation focuses on an area of her production that has received less critical attention: her only novel *Julia* and her travelogue *Tour in Switzerland*. For my study of Williams’ texts I consider the critical appreciation of Williams beyond “her account of the Revolution [that] is intimately grounded within an aesthetic borrowed from the novel of sensibility” (Watson 1992:18). In the present research I acknowledge the unequal presence of the aesthetics of sensibility, while at the same time I identify compelling Romantic aspects. For the most part, scholars have included Williams within Romantic studies based on the decade of 1790s in which she produced her major work. However, her consideration as a ‘romantic’ may not be based on chronological and political coincidence only. As a result of these considerations, my Master’s dissertation takes a closer look into the

fluctuations between sensibility and Romantic emotion, which I contend are characteristic of Williams' style.

For the purpose of my dissertation I have focused on Williams' use of the feminine voice, especially in *Julia*, the description of the perception of nature and the representation of the Sublime in it. There are several definitions and approaches to the Sublime and, as we shall see in the following chapters, Williams makes use of different conceptions of it. The first chapter analyses the tensions between Williams' tradition of sensibility and an individualized Romantic feeling by paying attention to her representation of the female heroine and nature in *Julia*. Williams' depiction of nature is intrinsically connected to the senses and offers an insight into the protagonist's individuality. Besides, Julia is portrayed as an unusual heroine if she is to be measured with the tradition of comparable heroines in late eighteenth century literature by women. In Williams' version, she reverses Rousseau's love triangle. In the second part of my dissertation I have analysed *Tour in Switzerland* by paying attention to the depiction of nature. Thus, my focus of analysis has been the elements of the tradition of Sensibility and the Romantic form of expression. The description of nature in this work is intrinsically related to the imagination. Williams' approach to nature takes place through a process of observation and meditation that anticipates Wordsworth's reflective poetry. Both show an inner attachment with nature but my analysis interrogates Williams' construction of a sense of a Sublime which is more benevolent than dangerous. In my reading of *Tour in Switzerland*, Williams' emotional experience is closer to a Burkean conceptualization of the Sublime as a terrible and dangerous experience. My Conclusions chapter seeks to summarize the results of my inquiries so far, while pointing at possible lines of research that could not be considered in this dissertation.

Chapter 1

Nature and the Individualization of Sensorial Experience in *Julia* (1790)

Williams' *Julia* was inspired by Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761). This novel enjoyed a good reception in England and was widely read during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Romantic figures such as Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley read it (Dart, 1999: 3), and the latter described it as a novel overflowing with "sublime genius, and more than human sensibility".² It presents a female protagonist in a domestic environment, as opposed to the female characters in *Letters written in France: 1790* or *Tour in Switzerland*, who take part in public life, in one way or another. In *Julia*, Williams presents a love triangle involving one man, Frederick Seymour, and two women, the cousins Julia Clifford and Charlotte. Frederick is already committed to Charlotte before he meets and falls in love with Julia. He marries Charlotte, while Julia repeatedly avoids him and refuses his declarations of love. After his death the two women bring up his and Charlotte's child together. This love triangle also links the novel to Goethe's *Werther*. Despite its Romantic overtones, *Julia* has been considered by Feminist scholars such as Dale Spender, Cheryl Turner or Janet Todd as an example of the novel of sensibility, since its heroine appears to be an "idealized woman of feeling" (Kennedy, 2002: 48). Throughout the following pages I will argue how Julia is a more complex character than she may appear.

The first time that Julia is described she gives the impression of having all the distinguishing traits of a heroine of sensibility:

Nature had liberally bestowed upon Julia Clifford the powers of the understanding, and the virtues of the heart: her sensibility was quick, her disposition affectionate, and her taste was improved by the society of her father, till it attained an uncommon degree of elegance and refinement; but of her superiority to others she seemed entirely

² Shelley's letters to T.L. Peacock cited in Dart, 1993.

unconscious. Her manners were perfectly modest and unassuming, her conversation simple and unstudied; she spoke from the impulse of her heart, and she possessed the most amiable candour and frankness of disposition. [...] She had a Madonna face, and an expression of intelligence and sensibility in her countenance, infinitely engaging. (3)

Julia's sensibility is constantly being emphasized. It was regarded as one of the most valuable traits in an eighteenth-century lady. Her sensibility goes together with her virtuosity and charm. She possesses 'the powers of the understanding', which makes reference to reason, the most highly acclaimed trait in the Enlightenment. Reason is equally as important as the 'virtues of the heart', which is an essential aspect of the literature of sensibility. This last phrase refers to Julia's feelings, considered 'virtuous'. The first two qualities that we get to know about Julia show a perfect balance between reason and feeling. Julia also speaks 'from the impulse of heart', implying that Julia's character naturally fits into the manners and education of the eighteenth century. Although these traits are given to her naturally, she has been educated to show good manners and refinement. Julia's natural qualities have improved due to her being in contact with others. As a result of it, Julia has acquired the qualities of elegance and refinement, both traits were adequate for social reunions, balls and coteries. The next line highlights her good and proper manners, which gives Julia a noticeable presence in social events. The emphasis on society, on company, is commonly found in eighteenth century literature, as it is the praise on her taste. Many publications defining taste and what was aesthetically pleasing appeared during this time. Showing good taste was a way to demonstrate that somebody was informed of these debates. Besides, Julia is endowed with a delicate beauty that stands out from the rest of the characters. Her external handsomeness seems to be in perfect harmony with her personality. As Elizabeth Fay describes, what society perceived of women was firstly their appearance, and therefore, in literary heroines their look should resemble their inner qualities (1998: 192). All the qualities that are being described the first time that Julia is presented put

an emphasis on Julia's external appearance rather on her inner psychology. This idea seems to coincide with the new ideology of femininity that "stressed the importance of innate virtues over physical appearance" (Agorni, 2002: 8). As a way to highlight Julia's natural traits, she is constantly compared to other characters:

[Charlotte] was sensible of her inferiority to Julia, whom she tenderly loved; and whenever any preference was shewn to herself she seemed conscious of its injustice. Quite content to remain in the back-ground, she embraced with the most natural and lively pleasure every opportunity of displaying the accomplishments of her cousin. (5)

Charlotte is another woman of sensibility and her principles prevent her from feeling any jealousy towards Julia. On the contrary, she welcomes and admires her cousin's values. Both characters are altruistic, an outstanding feature in heroines of sensibility. The central notion of sensibility, according to Chris Jones, is "that man was capable of benevolence and was naturally drawn towards it" (1993:69).

Up until now I have been presenting a description of Julia as a prototypical eighteenth-century heroine of sensibility that suggests an idealized and flat image of her. In the second chapter, readers learn something about Julia that may change the way in which they perceive her. Julia writes poetry. This is a meaningful detail because it gives Julia her own voice within the novel –that is interspersed with her poems– adding further complexity to the character. As readers, we get to know Julia's private and inner feelings. Her poems are characteristic of the poetry of sensibility and resemble the style of the first pieces that Helen Maria Williams wrote in her youth. Through her poems Julia is able to describe her own feelings and experiences. She shows her reactions in different occasions. For instance, she devotes a poem to a linnet and laments its suffering. These scenes emphasize Julia's benevolence and compassion. But her poems introduce miscellaneous subjects. For instance, the first poem that appears in the novel, "An Address to Poetry" expresses how poetry eases her sufferings. Poetry also allows her to escape the frivolous society that surrounds her. Nature is the source that inspires

Julia's poems: "Oh Nature! thou whose works divine/Such rapture in this breast inspire" (144-5). When Julia contemplates nature, she feels a moment of 'rapture', which hints a sense of the Sublime. She also describes poetry as 'wild' (136), suggesting that her poetry is true to her feelings, and not artificially copied from other sources.

In "An Address to Poetry", Julia also mentions relevant literary figures, Shakespeare, Milton, Thomson and Pope. She puts forward her true feelings but, at the same time, she demonstrates that she has read the great poets, indicating that she has a working knowledge of the literature that may have influenced her own productions. Julia does not only possess compassionate feelings naturally, but she also has the education that makes her a learned woman, which is something that differentiates her from other female characters in the novel. Julia turns to poetry instead of novels, which were considered the most suitable genre for women. Poetry was considered to be the highest form of literature. Julia has received the type of intellectual education promoted by Wollstonecraft; she is educated at home, supervised by her father.

She has also been instructed in the same subjects that his father studied, instead of receiving a typical education for girls:

In this retreat Captain Clifford found consolation and employment, in devoting his time to the improvement of his daughter; and his own mind being highly cultivated, she derived greater advantages from his instructions than she could have received from the most expensive education, under a less anxious as well as less able perceptor. (2)

The characteristics that are introduced in the first chapter provide an external account of Julia, but this is not enough for the author. Williams may be implying that a woman's internal disposition is equal or even more important than her looks and behaviour. In spite of this, Julia does not show her writings to others, since her close relations – presented as frivolous by the narrator – consider the inner feelings of women to be secondary to their looks and to the way these women interact with others.

As the plot unfolds, there are more examples of this interaction between Julia's portrayal as a heroine of Sensibility and the study of her inner emotions. In the seventh chapter, Julia's family, the Cliffords, manage to recover their old family mansion. The place in which the mansion is located is described in detail, and for Julia "the beauties of nature" (78) are felt "with particular sensibility" (78). This is not surprising since, as stated by Deborah Kennedy, "landscape meditations are characteristic of the literature of sensibility" (2002: 48). Interestingly enough, imagination becomes central in Julia's experience:

She had, till now, only seen the rich cultivated landscapes of the south of England; but her ardent imagination had often wandered amidst the wild scenery of the north, and formed a high idea of pleasure in contemplating its solemn aspect; and she found that the sublime and awful graces of nature exceed even the dream of fancy. (78)

The power of the imagination is 'ardent', implying that it is an intense emotion. Imagination was an essential faculty for the Romantics, that expands the abilities of perception and it is central in peaks of experience. This is the register in this passage by Williams: "her ardent imagination had often wandered amidst the wild scenery of the north". Williams also links the verb 'to wander' to the imagination. The motif of wandering and the figure of the wanderer would become a key theme in Romantic literature. For instance, a few years after *Julia* was published, Charlotte Smith published *Letters of a Solitary Wanderer* (1801) and Fanny Burney would follow suit with *The Wanderer* (1814), both considered exemplary texts of Romantic literature written by women, and consistent with William Wordsworth's wanderings in the Lake District. Fancy was considered a capacity of perception, that according to the OED (1991) it is "the process, and the faculty, of forming mental representations of things not presented to the senses; chiefly applied to the so-called creative or productive imagination, which frames images of objects, events or conditions that have not occurred in actual experience". Although in the nineteenth century fancy and imagination became

differentiated concepts, for the Romantics, fancy was used to express the ability of invention. Here, Fancy is linked to dreams, the ultimate expression of subjective and private sentiment. Julia's perception in this passage results in an individualized experience that goes beyond the perception of reality.

In the following page, Julia shows an agitated emotional state. When Julia and Charlotte are going for a walk, they find a waterfall: "Every other sound was lost in the fall of the torrent, a sound which Julia had never heard before, and which seemed to strike upon her soul, and call forth emotions congenial to its solemn cadence" (80). The experience described here is strongly reliant on her senses. It is the sound produced by the waters what seems 'to strike upon her soul'. It hits Julia's soul in a sudden and violent way, originating a very intense experience. She even compares the emotions that she is facing to the agitated waters. Julia's emotions are in disarray after contemplating nature. This whole scene happens at nightfall, when the moonbeams "suddenly spread their light over the whole lake, except where long deep lines of shadow were thrown from the rocks on its surface" (80). Julia is contemplating this scenery at night, and the way in which light and shade cast their shadows influence her perception. Coleridge believed that the contrast of dark and light in nature had the power to modify the imagination (Trott, 1998: 77). The feelings become so stimulating that there is a point in which Julia seems to be experiencing something close to the Sublime: "Julia gazed upon the objects which surrounded her with a transport of mind which she never had felt before. She uttered frequent exclamations of admiration and wonder; but she found it impossible to express the sensations with which her soul was overwhelmed" (80). Julia's mind is 'transported' as if it was being lifted, creating a sense of sublimity in the passage. However, the tropes of sensibility are still accounted for. The "frequent exclamations of admiration and wonder" emphasize the outward expression of feelings,

characteristic of the literature of sensibility. Julia finds “impossible to express the sensations”. This is striking since the literature of sensibility tends to focus on the expression of emotions. Julia is confused because her mind is overwhelmed by the strong sensations that she has “never felt before”. While she experiences emotions that “transport her”, she does not know how to articulate these feelings through language.

Williams is not supplanting the tradition of sensibility, but, in some passages she is beginning to show interest in different artistic modes of expression. Julia has experienced a strong emotion and statements such as “strike upon her soul”, and “her soul was overwhelmed” suggest a rather agitating experience. However, in the following page, nature soothes “the passions into peace, excite the gentlest emotions” (81). This seems contradictory to the feelings that Julia was previously experiencing. The contemplation of natural scenery serves the purpose of improving moral qualities. “In the country, the mind borrows virtue from the scene” (81). In the literature of sensibility, the episodes encountered by the character tend to have the effect of perfecting their morals and make them even more adequate for society. Now, Julia becomes again a ‘rational woman’ looking for reason and peace, more moderate feelings that correspond to an exemplary eighteenth century lady. The concept of ‘rational woman’ is explained by Anne K. Mellor:

[It] had an enormous impact upon the women writing in England between 1780 and 1830. Maria Edgeworth, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Hays, Susan Ferrier, Mary Brunton and Jane Austen all wrote novels designed to advocate the revolutionary idea that women must think as well as feel, that they must act with prudence, avoid the pitfalls of sexual desire, and learn from their mistakes. (1993: 40)

The inconsistencies between the controlled feelings and the intense ones that Julia goes through are separated by just a few lines apart, which is representative of the tension that we find in Williams’ work.

1.1. Emotion and Self-knowledge

Although Julia may share several traits with other heroines of sensibility, it presents a few others that make her stand out. She is usually portrayed in relation to other members of society, and attends balls and social gatherings. However, she shows preference for spending some time alone. Although she possesses all the characteristic that make her suitable in society, she feels uncomfortable in these situations. She prefers reading and cultivating her mind, while she dislikes the frivolity of these social amusements and its attendants. When she is alone, Julia looks for calming the agitation caused by the certainty that Frederick is in love with her and not with her cousin Charlotte. When her friends go to the ball she decides to take a walk alone by the woods:

She seated herself on a green bank, at the foot of an old oak: the lake was seen, and the sound of the torrent was heard foaming down the cliffs at a distance. The trees formed a thousand wild avenues, and the paths of the wood appeared as if they had never been trodden by any human foot-step. Julia, in this solitude, found “room for meditation even to madness”. (135)

The scenery described here is wild and distant from the work of man. However, the effect that this wildness produces on Julia is one of calm: “The beauties of the landscape at length soothed and elevated her mind” (135). Julia turns to nature and solitude in order to meditate and calm her mind but it also seems as if it was the only place where she can give free rein to her true inner feelings. I think that is what she means thinking that in solitude she finds room for madness. A state of madness involves the excess of the mind away from rationality. The fact that Julia seems to look for that state of madness in solitude seems a contradiction for a character that seems to coincide with the definition of ‘rational woman’. Frederick Burwick explains that during the Romantic period, it was believed that madness was liberating and “could free the imagination from the ‘restraint of conformity’” (1996: 2). This idea is not developed in *Julia*, but

it points towards it. Social norms oppress Julia and madness is an escape from these restrictions. This may be the reason why Julia regards madness as liberating, although she does not seem to experience it at any point in the novel. In this passage, the experience of meditation in nature seems to be presented as a completely individual experience. Interestingly enough, when Frederick Seymour takes Julia by surprise, her reaction to the landscape becomes the expected one in a novel of sensibility. Julia tells him: “my tears were nothing more than a movement of admiration at the view of nature; the solitude and grandeur of the scene affected me, and my tears flowed, because I felt pleasure in shedding them” (138-9). Julia’s outward expression of emotions is openly described. This peculiarity of sensibility was being regarded as something negative at the end of the eighteenth century (Mullan, 1996: 236) in favour of the inner experience.

There is another episode in which Julia visits a natural scenery. This time, she is accompanied by her friends and her cousin Charlotte. Her companions’ disposition serve as a contrast to Julia’s, since she is presented as having a higher understanding of nature. Julia and her friends visit some ruins, this location is typical of the gothic narratives, which were popular in the eighteenth century. Ruins would continue to be a major interest for the Romantics. “Julia gazed from the turret on the sublime landscape which surrounded her, and the venerable ruins, with that solemn emotion so grateful to a contemplative mind” (194). Julia’s intense experience is attributed to her “contemplative mind”. One of Julia’s skills, which is emphasized in this passage, is that she has the natural ability to perceive and see things in nature. This characteristic differs from the more external and superficial description of Julia in the first chapter. As the novel unfolds –and especially in the first volume– Julia’s psychology is developed. For the Romantics, the contemplation of nature was necessary for the creative process. They believed that it was a way to improve and understand oneself. At a time when the

scientific and empirical observation of the world was emphasized, a more subjective and contemplative perspective was gradually taking hold. William Wordsworth also puts an emphasis on contemplation in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where he wrote that a poet:

[...] Considers man in his own nature and in his ordinary life as contemplating this with a certain quantity of immediate knowledge, with certain convictions, intuitions, and deductions which by habit become of the nature of intuitions; he considers him as looking upon this complex scene of ideas and sensations, and finding everywhere objects that immediately excite in him sympathies which, from the necessities of his nature, are accompanied by an overbalance of enjoyment. (Wordsworth, 2013 [1802]: 99)

Julia would match this description inasmuch as she constantly finds people and animals that stimulate her curiosity and sympathy. This is true of the episodes in which she selflessly helps the needy and establishes a friendship with them when no one else does. An instance of this would be Julia's friendship with Mrs. Meynell. The same goes for the intense emotions that she discovers in the natural landscape, or as in the latter case, in the ruins. This characteristic is portrayed in the novel as belonging to Julia only. When she is enjoying the contemplation of the ruins and the scenery, Charlotte wants to return home, thus showing that she lacks this "contemplative mind": "Charlotte, who had in vain reminded Julia several times of going home, now told her: 'That she hoped she was not determined to take up her abode at the abbey; because, added Charlotte, 'though our own house is less sublime, it has the advantage of being roofed'" (195-6). Charlotte seems to prefer the comfortability of the home, typically attributed to feminine domesticity in the eighteenth century, whereas Julia wishes to remain in the natural environment that prompts her intense feelings. Charlotte utters those words right after the ruins are described as a dark and terrible place: "Under the towers were a number of gloomy subterraneous apartments with vaulted roofs, the use of which imagination was left to guess, and could only appropriate to punishment and horror"

(195). Although the place is described as a daunting one, reminiscent of a gothic scenery, Julia wants to remain there. This might be pointing at the experience of enjoyable terror that is not completely developed in *Julia*, but it is to be found in other works by Williams, such as *Tour in Switzerland*.

In the last passage, Julia experiences nature in the company of her friends. However, there are more passages in which we can see Julia's experience again in solitude. All of these episodes take place when Julia looks for moral comfort after a distressing encounter with Frederick Seymour. In chapter XVIII, "Julia, agitated and oppressed, desired nothing so much as a day of solitude" (222). Again, in order to placate her discomfort: "she walked to her favourite nook, that overhung the lake, and contemplated the majesty of nature; passed some hours in meditation, and returned home with a mind elevated above the sadness and depression with which she had set out". (22-3) Nature has a calming effect but it also 'elevates' Julia's mind. This suggests that the contemplation of nature brings high-minded thoughts to Julia, who thinks far beyond her rather trivial problems, 'sadness' and 'depression'. In this case, Julia's experience in solitude is not limited only to nature, she also turns to poetry: "She congratulated herself on the comfort of one evening of undisturbed calmness, brought a volume of each of her favourite poets" (224). As it has been already indicated previously in the novel, literature is another way for Julia to cultivate her interiority. She does not only write, but as she anticipates in her poem "An Ode to Poetry", she also improves herself by reading. This once more coincides with Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas of female education. Julia's education appears to be confined within the limits of the house, but it allows her to look beyond and find interest in nature and literature. She is presented as a role model for female education, which combines Julia's sensibility with the cultivation of the inner mind through literature -both reading and writing- and

the contemplation of nature. Moreover, as Deborah Kennedy points out, Williams rejects the superficial as well superficial sensibility. In other contemporary novels (such as *Tom Jones* or *Camilla*), the learned female character is the one that is mocked but we find the opposite scheme in Williams' *Julia*:

In Williams' novel, it is the frivolous characters who are ridiculed for preferring cards over books. This is one way in which her work differs from the satirical treatment of literary women that we see, for instance, in Henry Fielding's *Lady Di Western* from *Tom Jones*, and in the novels of Fanny Burney, whose intellectual or literary characters are mocked either by other characters (the scholarly Eugenia in *Camilla*) or by the narrator herself (Elinor in *The Wanderer*, or Mrs. Selwyn in *Evelina*). (Kennedy, 2002: 48)

The mockery of fake sensibility may imply that Williams looks for a profound and inner experience of feeling, rather than the outward manifestation of it and its consequent body reaction, which, according to the novel can be easily faked. Adding to this, in the context of the last decade of the eighteenth century, the literature of sensibility progressively lost prestige.

At the end of the novel, Julia shows her concern with the political situation of the time when she asks for the political situation in France and reads "La Bastille: a poem". This shows Williams' support for the cause of the French Revolution. It is surprising for an eighteenth century lady, to be interested not only in literature, but also in politics, which was restricted to the sphere of men. As a result, Williams' Julia is by no means a mere translation or copy of Rousseau's novel. We can observe a proto-feminist awareness which transgresses the conventions of the eighteenth century novel. In Williams' novel, there is a role reversal since it is the married man who falls in love outside marriage and suffers the consequences. Williams assumes her own feminine discourse and defies the established elements of the literature of Sensibility, in which, traditionally, the story is built around the heroine's search for a suitable husband. According to Harriet Guest "For Wollstonecraft, the ignorance of women is specifically

the result of their confinement to the single employment or pursuit of marriage” (2000: 62). In the same vein, Williams does not present any happy marriage in the novel. Julia refuses to marry without love because that would mean renouncing to her individuality. In the end, Julia and her cousin bring up Charlotte’s and Seymour’s children together. This is offered as a better prospect than the disturbances that Frederick had occasioned on them. Williams praises these women’s self-reliance at a time when “independence in a romance was almost always viewed as a sad necessity, the result of the failure of the man to provide for her, or of the woman to procure a husband” (Todd, 1989: 205).

Chapter 2

Tour in Switzerland (1798)

Tour in Switzerland (1798) was written in 1794 during the six months that Helen Maria Williams spent traveling around Switzerland. She was escaping political persecution in France during Robespierre’s rise to power. These times of the French Revolution, also known as ‘The Terror’, brought along with it political persecution for Williams, who was even imprisoned as a result of her Girondist political ideas. She travelled to Switzerland with John Stone and other friends and relatives. She decided to write a travelogue of her journeys through Switzerland, since travel literature had become a popular genre in the Eighteenth century. Some examples of this tradition in the English language are Lady Mary Montagu’s *The Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763), Hester Piozzi *Observations and Reflections* (1789) or Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796). Travel writing in English continued to enjoy

popularity in the Nineteenth Century. An example of this is Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *History of a Six Week's Tour* (1817). Elizabeth Fay explains that the main characteristic of travel literature as a genre is its personal tone, since it is the narration of the writer's own experience. Fay adds that it was a genre that allowed women writers to show their literary talent as it presented the author as amateur rather than as an authority or scholar (2015: 73). Williams, however, does not fashion herself as an amateur writer. She was by then a well-known figure. Her travel writings are unique inasmuch as she mixes the political writing with the description of nature and travel anecdotes. Writing about politics was considered to be a serious and manly occupation, and the fact that Williams wrote about it made her vulnerable to criticism. Regardless of it, she wrote about politics for her entire literary career, and it was one of her main concerns from her first publications. Along the same lines of *Letters from in France*, in which she defends the ideas of the French Revolution, in *Tour in Switzerland* we also find a vindication of Revolutionary ideas. Interestingly enough, the contemplation of nature and rural life would become relevant motifs in this work.

Of all of Williams' works, *Tour in Switzerland* is the closest to a full display of Romantic themes and to the search of a poetic voice of one's own. Imagination and emotion became central to Williams' approach to nature. Her interest in Switzerland probably came from Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*. As already noted in the previous chapter, Williams' *Julia* was inspired by this novel. Rousseau had become an extremely influential figure and Williams was knowledgeable about his work. Deborah Kennedy points out that Williams "quotes directly from Rousseau when giving an account of her travels" (2002: 135). In the fifth page of the second volume, Williams writes: "After a slight interval of repose, however, we found ourselves restored to that feeling of serene, tranquil delight [...] and which state of soothing happiness Rousseau

has described with his usual eloquence, in a letter to Julia” (5). In a footnote, she directly quotes the letter she is referring to. The effects of nature in Williams in this passage are reminiscent of the soothing effect we found in Williams’ *Julia*. By contrast, in *Tour in Switzerland* nature is tumultuous and causes agitation in her. Besides, Switzerland was considered a paradigm of political stability at the time. That is why it became an essential destination for those like Williams who were concerned with political matters. In her *Tour* Williams advocates for the need of a political revolution following the one that took place in France. Adding to this, Swiss alpine landscapes were a popular destination for travellers during the Eighteenth century. All these reasons made Switzerland a frequent choice for the background of literary works. Williams’s *Tour in Switzerland* meets this tradition, which was continued by the Romantics in the following century. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem ‘Mont Blanc’, William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* or Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* stand out among many examples. Thus, Switzerland seems to be the most appropriate place for Williams to write her most Romantic work.

Although the echoes of the literature of sensibility are still present, the fact that these coexist with an intensely emotional and internalized perception of nature creates a tension already tangible from the Preface. It starts with Williams claiming the originality of her writing. Such a statement is in itself Romantic since she moves away from the claims of modesty from her previous works. Here, she wants to make sure that the reader knows that she has not copied or followed previous books. She was aware of the fact that, since many writings about Switzerland were published in that period, she could be criticized for being unoriginal. She maintains that what she writes is an “original drawing, copied from Nature and not from books” (A3). She even claims to

have recollected “with regret, that the paths which I had delighted to tread had been trodden before; and that the objects on which I had gazed with astonishment had been already described” (A3). She wants to have her own voice heard as an individual author. Williams seems concerned with the individual seal of her work. Abrams wrote that in Romanticism “the artist himself becomes the major element generating both the artistic product and the criteria by which it is to be judged” (1971[1953]: 22) and this is exactly what Williams is presenting to the reader here. Abrams added that the origin of this idea could be found in previous literature, but it took hold in Romantic authors. Williams makes clear that her only source of inspiration is her own imagination and the feelings inspired in the contemplation of the landscape. Williams is underscoring the creation of her work rather than the quality of the result:

In presenting to the Public a View of Switzerland, a country of which so much has been already written, it may perhaps become me to clear myself from the charge of presumption. The descriptive parts of this journal were rapidly traced with the ardor of a fond imagination, eager to seize the vivid colouring of the moment ere it fled, and give permanence to the emotions of admiration, while the solemn enthusiasm beat high in my bosom. (A3)

In this passage, Williams puts the imagination at the centre of her creative process, emphasized by words such as ‘ardor’ and ‘fond’. She insists on the intensity of it. Imagination becomes the driving force in her composition. She traces the ‘descriptive parts’ ‘rapidly’, which is indicative of the spontaneity of her writing. The choice of the verb ‘to trace’ instead of ‘to write’ also implies that her creation is instinctive rather than rationally deliberated. Through her imagination, she freely writes the feelings that nature awakens in her. In the lines that follow, she continues to give spontaneity a central part. Her aim is not only to captivate the landscape, but the emotion that she felt in a specific moment in time, she wants to ‘seize’ it. Williams is aware that these emotions cannot be repeated, and she ‘gives permanence’ to them in her writing. In this

way, her approach to nature could be considered to be similar to Wordsworth's, who entitles his poems by alluding to a specific moment in time and place. Some examples of this are "Composed at Rydal on May Morning, 1838", or "Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at evening". Wordsworth is very specific and he mentions not only the place and date but sometimes even the time of the day. In the same vein, Williams always indicates in the subtitle of each chapter the places that she describes in them. Emotions are as important as spontaneity. Williams' experience is 'vivid' and dynamic, which makes her heart beats fast. She describes how her body reacts to external impulses, something reminiscent of the literature of sensibility and its emphasis on reaction and perception. However, the experience of contemplating nature becomes rather active and intense, as opposed to the soothing nature that she described before in *Julia*.

In the second part of the Preface, she explains her political intentions in writing this travelogue. "It is the present moral situation of Switzerland that justifies the appearance of these volumes, in which an attempt is made to trace the important effects which the French Revolution has produced in that country" (2). After addressing a page and a half to the originality of her passages devoted to nature, she grants one page to the 'moral' purpose of *Tour in Switzerland*. It is nevertheless a significant fact that Williams, who has been seen as mainly concerned with politics, devotes the beginning of the Preface to nature.

2.1. The Sublime in Nature

Williams devotes the first chapter to the social activities of the inhabitants of Basil – female societies, smoke clubs– and compares them to Parisian ones. In this same chapter, we find the first passage about nature. Williams does not describe a natural

landscape but she explains what she anticipates to find in the scenery of Switzerland. She looks forward to visiting the natural locations, and this idea “has so often swelled my imagination” (II,4). She has already concocted a mental picture of these places in her imagination. The verb ‘to swell’ suggests that thinking about these places inspires a bodily reaction as well as a stimulus of her imagination, associating imagination with nature. Williams writes that she looks forward to contemplating natural objects and “to sooth my desponding heart with the hope that the moral disorder I have witnessed shall be rectified, while I gaze on nature in all her admirable perfections” (I, 4). The landscapes that she anticipates are pleasant, ‘perfect’. Nature is seen as a comfort zone in which she can be relieved after the troubles she has experienced in France. She wants to recover from her ‘moral disorder’, implying that nature can influence and improve her mental state. This resembles the passages in Williams's novel, *Julia*, where the protagonist resorts to nature in order to recover from her emotional distress.

In the fourth chapter, Williams leaves the social life of Basil and spends sometime in the countryside. At first, she contemplates nature and finds the soothing effect that she anticipated. The cascades that she describes “had more of beauty than sublimity, but which filled my heart with emotion” (I, 49). There are several theories of the Sublime, but this sentence can be associated to Edmund Burke’s theories of the Sublime and beautiful. Although they defended opposite positions during the French Revolution, Williams must have read Edmund Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. In the introduction to *The Sublime: a reader in British eighteenth-century aesthetic theory* (1996), Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla evaluate the changes in the concept of the Sublime during the eighteenth century but consider Burke to be “its first major theorist” (12). In his *Enquire*, Burke describes the aesthetic concepts of the beautiful and the Sublime, and makes a

distinction between them. Burke linked the beautiful with a feeling of pleasure, social comfort and morals (Bullard, 2012: 59). For its part: “The Sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation. That is therefore one of the most affecting we have. That its strongest emotion is an emotion of distress, and that no pleasure from a positive cause belongs to it” (1990 [1757]: 79). The Sublime in Burke is always linked to a feeling of terror that disturbs emotional tranquillity. Williams considers the falls beautiful since they produce a pleasant and moral effect on her. It is a positive feeling and that is possibly what she means by saying that it had “more of beauty”; its effects are agreeable rather than agitating.

Surprisingly, the way in which she perceives nature changes in the following paragraph: “I was yet only in the vestibule of Switzerland, and nature appeared to me as if lifting up gradually the veil which concealed those mighty objects of overwhelming grandeur, which my imagination sprung forward to meet with enthusiastic rapture” (I, 49). At this point, Williams experiences a different way of perceiving natural elements. This is made explicit by the image of “lifting the veil”, as if she was discovering a new way of understanding nature. The veil here could be used as a metaphor for the revelation of a liminal space. This liminality indicates a space between reality and the spiritual world. The image of the veil implies that the author has found a new way to comprehend reality, which does not limit itself to the physical world. The result of this discovery is that the author is now able to see the true aspect of things. Nature itself is the agent that makes this change possible. In this new experience, imagination ‘springs forward’, indicating how it conditions the way in which the writer perceives nature, and not the other way around. Imagination was necessary for the Romantics in order to contemplate nature, according to Abrams, for the Romantics “nature is seen through the imagination” (1971[1953]: 54). The reaction that she feels in this moment seems very

close to the experience of the Sublime. The objects that she contemplates are ‘overwhelming’ and this causes ‘enthusiastic rapture’. As maintained by Jack G. Voller, the Sublime occurs at a moment of “inspired astonishment” (1994: 4). This is followed by a “moment of suspension” and “sense of elevation and expansion” (Voller, 1994: 4), which coincides with Williams’s sensation of ‘rapture’.

In the same chapter, Williams narrates the first time that she visits the Alps and the feelings that this vision awakens in her. In the eighteenth-century theories of the Sublime, mountains were considered the perfect place to experience it. An example of this is John Baillie's *An essay on the Sublime* (1747): “to fill the soul, and raise it to Sublime sensations, the earth must rise into an Alp, or Pyrrhenean, and mountains piled upon mountains, reach to the very heavens” (1996 [1747]: 88). The interest in the Alps was still alive half a century later. William Wordsworth also described the alpine landscapes in *Descriptive Sketches* (1793), where he recounts his visit to Switzerland in 1790. Williams registers her feelings when she sees the alpine mountains: “It was not without the most powerful emotion that, for the first time, I cast my eyes on that solemn, that majestic vision, the Alps! - how often had the idea of those stupendous mountains filled my heart with enthusiastic awe!” (I, 57). This sentence denotes the intensity of emotion and the powerful feelings. For Williams, this is “the most powerful emotion”. The use of the superlative indicates that she has never felt emotions with the same earnestness. Again, she uses the word ‘enthusiasm’ and changes ‘rapture’ for ‘awe’. The suspension described here is similar to the one commented on earlier, which Williams had previously referred to as ‘enthusiastic rapture’. Here she changes the word ‘rapture’ for ‘awe’, which indicates a state of shock. This is not a full synonym of ‘rapture’, since this word tends to be associated with a religious experience. The episode that Williams relates in this passage is also profoundly sensorial. The first moment that

she 'cast her eyes' in the mountains of the Alps is being described as a 'vision'. The emotion that Williams shows is emphasized by the idea that she had always been looking for its contemplation. "So long, so eagerly, had I desired to contemplate that scene of wonders" (II: 57).

Williams's description of her visit to the fall of the Rhine at Laussen presents a landscape which is not peaceful but chaotic and full of energy, something that "excited the stronger feelings of wonder, mingled with admiration" (I,58). In the description of the cataract, Williams is fascinated by the chaos of wild nature: "That stupendous cataract, rushing with wild impetuosity over those broken, unequal rocks" and creating a "tumultuous sound" (I,60). Using words such as 'impetuosity' and 'tumultuous' may imply that what she admires in the contemplation of the fall is its intensity. Turbulent nature, as presented in the fall with its strong stream of water, shows the power and strength of nature, as opposed to the pleasant and relaxing scenes that she described in the previous pages. Waterfalls become archetypical representations of turbulent nature. Williams's fascination with tumultuous nature indicates that she does not always look for calm. Williams is stimulated by the strong emotions inspired by the sight of the waterfall. Her description of her experience in the fall of the Rhine at Laussen is probably the closest example in the book to the Sublime in nature. Most of the elements that Voller presents in his theory of the Sublime experience can be identified in the passage: "Never, never can I forget the sensations of that moment! when with a sort of annihilation of self, with every past impression erased from by memory, I felt as if my heart were bursting with emotions too strong to be sustained" (I, 60). Voller places the origin of the Sublime experience in the sentiment of "awe" that is "produced by the more powerful manifestation of natural force" (1994:3). In this case, the 'awe' is produced by the waterfall, which is the origin of the emotional response. Voller adds

that it is a “sensual experience” (1994:4). In this passage in particular, not only the vision of the fall but also its “tumultuous sound” evince how the senses are necessary for the experience. Baillie also stated in his essay that “the eyes and ears are the only inlets to the Sublime” (1996 [1747]: 100). The natural phenomenon, the waterfall in this case, produces “an absence of self, the suspension of most cognitive, emotional and sensory faculties” (Voller, 1994:11). In Burke’s theory this suspension is called “astonishment” and it is considered “a state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended” (1990 [1757]: 53). In William’s passage it is called “annihilation of self”. The word ‘annihilation’ presents this feeling as a very violent and of enormous intensity. All of Williams’s faculties disappear “with every impression erased from my memory”. The whole of the sublime experience is fuelled and also dominated by intense feelings: “emotions too strong to be sustained”. After this episode, Williams states that she now perceives nature in a different way, finding a ‘new image of nature’. She writes: “Oh, majestic torrent! Which hast conveyed a new image of nature to my soul” (I,60). The origin of this response is a natural element, the torrent. This incident is described as being very intense, leaving an indelible mark in her memory: “The moments I have passed in contemplating thy sublimity will form an epocha in my short span!” (I,61). The powerful image that Williams presents could be emphasizing the authenticity of it. It will also “form an epocha in my short span”. Williams’s “new image of nature” is very personal, since it is directed to herself and her own reactions. “The cataract, however, had for me a sort of fascinating power, which, if I withdrew my eyes for a moment, again fastened them on its impetuous water” (I, 62). Burke explains in his *Enquiry* that when experiencing the Sublime “the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other” (1990 [1757]: 53).

The experience of contemplating nature also takes on a metaphysical aspect. The writer realises, after gazing at the greatness of nature, the smallness of her own life. Nature is greater than man and it is nature what dominates human life and not the other way around. The metaphysical side of experiencing the Sublime is dealt with in Voller's theory. According to him, the aesthetic and metaphysical meanings of 'sublimity' are inseparable (1994:7). Nature was seen as boundless and infinite and this could trigger the awareness of the limits of human life: "Boundlessness, then, is the key to the sublime power of the infinite" (Voller, 1994:7). The idea of boundlessness comes from Immanuel Kant, who wrote in *The Critique of Judgment* that the beautiful has forms and limits, whereas the Sublime is unlimited (Trott, 1998: 76). Williams also sees nature as limitless:

What an effort does it require to leave after a transient glimpse, a scene on which, while we meditate, we can take no account of time! Its narrow limits seem too confined for the expanded spirit; such objects appear to belong to immortality; they call the musing mind from all its little cares and vanities, to higher destinies and regions. (I,61)

In the first sentence, Williams is suggesting that the contemplation of nature is the way for the mind to catch a 'glimpse', or to observe for a moment the powers that go beyond human nature. This offers a contrast with the moral and calming effect of nature described in the previous passages. Becoming aware of the littleness and ephemerality of human life can be regarded to be rather stimulating than soothing. In this passage, time is suspended: 'we can take no account of time', which could be implying that the soul gets past the limits of the physical time. Nature is the door to achieve a timeless experience and 'expand' the spirit. Williams expresses how human consciousness limits the soul with its petty cares and vanities. Through the sublime experience, the writer is able to transcend the worldly limits even if for a short period of time.

Williams continues the reflection on the transcendental power of nature two pages later. This time, she is observing the rural life of the inhabitants of Switzerland and their daily activities. This local interest can be found in Wordsworth, who recounts in many of his poems, such as “The Solitary Reaper”, the everyday work of peasants. He presents these ideas in the “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads”: “Humble and rustic life was generally chosen because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language” (2013:108). Kennedy relates this to Williams’s own vision of the ‘humble life’ (2002: 24). According to Kennedy, this is not only present in *Tour in Switzerland* but also in her first poems, where she emphasizes the virtue of and “dignity of the poor”, which has “much in common with Wordsworth’s poetry of rural life” (Kennedy, 2002: 124). In this particular passage of *Tour in Switzerland*, Williams mentions rural life but she does not concentrate so much on the peasants but on her own psychology:

Sheltered within this little nook, and accustomed to the neighbourhood of the torrent, the boatman unloads his merchandize, and the artisan pursues his toil, regardless of the falling river, and inattentive to those thundering sounds which seem calculated to suspend all human activity in solemn and awful astonishment; while the imagination of the spectator is struck with the comparative littleness of fleeting man, busy with his trivial occupations, contrasted with the view of nature in all her vast, eternal, uncontrollable grandeur. (I, 63)

The boatman and artisan are used to exemplify the insignificance of human life, as I have explained before. These few lines, almost at the end of chapter four, seem to encapsulate the whole experience narrated in the whole passage. She refers to the sublime experience that suspends “all human activity in solemn and awful astonishment”. She also emphasizes the power of the senses, referring to the sound, and alludes to the power of the imagination. The main elements of her experience are

external stimuli –the sound– paired with the power of her own imagination. The result of this process is the suspension of the human mind. Wordsworth and Williams share a similar aesthetic representation of Nature, even when they find and conceptualize Sublime elements in it. However, as we shall see in the next section, for Williams it may also be dreadful.

In this passage, rural characters seem also to ennoble the poetic perception of the writer. She seems to be the only one who values the power of this place. She does the same a few pages earlier. Williams explains that she has been “assured that the cataract of the Rhine was ‘but a fall of water’” (I,59). According to this, she is able to see and register things in nature that go unnoticed to others. Where some see nothing but a ‘fall of water’, she finds a ‘majestic torrent’ (I,60). This could be pointing at the superior mind of the writer, who does not see nature as mere worldly objects. This idea is repeated through the whole book. For instance, at the beginning of the second volume Williams writes: “while my fellow travellers amused themselves by wandering over that world of ice, a difficult and dangerous enterprise, I sat down on the border of the Glacier, to enjoy the new and magnificent vision around me” (II, 6). The belief that the artist had a superior mind, and that he or she was able to understand those things that escape the understanding of most, is already found in Williams’s poems of sensibility, where the heroines performed charitable deeds in order to help others. Williams herself directed those superior feelings to protest against social injustice. However, in *Tour in Switzerland*, the special perception of Williams goes beyond human matters and it is closer to the spiritual world.

The sense of the Sublime, in the passages that have been previously discussed are expressed in prose. There is, however, one poem included in the second volume entitled “A Hymn Written Among the Alps”, which constitutes a short interval in the

prose. As Williams did before in *Julia*, she includes some poems in her prose work.

Williams explains the creation and purpose of the poem in this manner:

I employed the hours of meditation in throwing together the new images with which the Alpine scenery had filled my mind, into the form of an hymn, to the author of nature; and no spot can surely be more congenial to devotional feelings, than that there where the divinity has displayed the most stupendous of his earthly works (II,7).

This poem, written in ‘meditation’ is profoundly spiritual. Interestingly enough, in the previous passages Williams was not certain about the nature of this spirituality. In her “Hymn” the feelings are clearly of a religious nature. After contemplating the greatness in nature, the sensation of Sublime results in a devotional response. The poem starts by directly addressing God: “Creation’s God! with thought elate,/Thy hand divine I see/ Impressed on scenes, where all is great,/where all is full of thee!” (1-4). The poetic voice sees the hand of God in all natural objects. It appears as if these natural elements were all a reminder of the power of God’s creation. From then, in the next 6 stanzas, several beautiful natural elements are named, as all the places in which the poetic voice is able to see God’s work. The eighth stanza is particularly interesting because Williams once again attributes the improvement of moral qualities to nature: “Where cloudless regions calm the soul,/Bid mortal cares be still/Can passion’s wayward wish controul,/And rectify the will” (29-31). In this stanza, nature displays the same qualities that it presented in *Julia*. The contemplation of nature results in the control of human passions and the improvement of moral qualities. In the next four lines we can observe that a feeling of sublimity builds up. In this poem in particular, this experience is close to the sublime although is not as developed as in the prose chapters. The Sublime element in this lyric results in the improvement of moral virtues: “Where midst some vast expanse the mind,/Which swelling virtue fires,/Forgets that earth it leaves behind/and to its heaven aspires” (33-36). Williams reached a spiritual dimension after

contemplating nature in the passages of chapter 4, without specifying any particular religious or philosophical belief. By contrast, she clearly states in this poem that spirituality corresponds to Christian devotion, as indicated, for instance, in the allusion to heaven. The experience is still full of intense emotions as pointed out by the 'vast expanse' or the use of the verb 'fire'. In his theory of the sublime experience, Voller identifies the 'religious sublime' as a variety of conventional sublimity (Voller, 1994: 4). He explains that in the Enlightenment "the natural began to acquire Christian metaphysical implications" (1994: 7). Stanzas 9 to 18 follow the same pattern as stanzas 2 to 8, several natural elements -in which the poetical voice finds God- are listed. The stanza that closes the poem again links an element of the natural sublime to the power of God: "In every scene, where every hour/Sheds some terrific grace,/In Nature's vast o'erwhelming power,/ thee, thee, my God, I trace!" (77-80). The conclusion of the poem is that the power of God can be found in every natural scene, but once again the reference to 'Nature's o'erwhelming power' points at the Sublime in nature.

2.2. The Dread of the Sublime and Williams' *Conclusion*

In chapter XI, Williams encounters a new aspect of nature. After describing the soothing scenery, she now faces a terrifying environment. Nature becomes dangerous, it asserts its power over man, and Williams conveys for the first time in the book that it can be destructive. This episode is located in a gulf near Wassen, which she describes as a "dark abyss" (I, 151). Gulfs and abysses are, according to Burke, typical places to find obscurity, which is central to his sense of the sublime. The first emotion that Williams feels "is that of terror" (I, 151). In *Tour in Switzerland*, Williams presents the contemplation of nature from several viewpoints, the beautiful, the turbulent and the malevolent. Yet, in some passages of chapter XI, the lines that differentiate good from

evil become blurred and nature can be terrifying and delightful simultaneously. Williams acknowledges that she has felt terror but then she leaves “the mind the full indulgence of the sensations of solemn enthusiastic delight, which swell the heart, while we contemplate such stupendous objects” (I, 151). This experience is delightful and nature ‘stupendous’. However, she contemplates nature with solemnity, which according to the OED (1991) it means “impressiveness” or “gravity”, as if the landscape intimidated her still.

Williams also explores the struggle between man and nature, and she writes that “man is obliged to be continually at war with nature” (I, 154). In *Tour in Switzerland*, natural phenomena such as snow avalanches, become also threatening agents of destruction. The inhabitants of this region in Switzerland have to be weary of these avalanches, which display an enormous power of destruction: “When whole forests of majestic height are swept away with irresistible fury, what means of defence can human force oppose to such mighty destruction?” (I, 154). Williams suggests with this rhetorical question that natural forces are stronger than human nature. If natural phenomena are capable of destructing whole forests, humans have no escape. Nature employs its “irresistible fury”, which alludes to its violence and intensity. It ‘sweeps away’ anything that finds in its path, presenting nature as a kind of monstrous being. Again, Williams ponders on the insignificance of human life compared to the immensity of nature. It was its greatness that made herself feel small before. Now it is its destructive power what makes her reflect upon the fragility of human life.

Williams writes in the following page: “As we advanced, the country, which had hitherto presented scenes of blended grace and majesty, began to assume an aspect of savage wildness and terror” (155, I). In the previous lines, Williams herself draws the comparison between the natural scenes described before and the one that she finds now.

Nature here is described as “savage” that according to the OED (1991) may refer to wild scenery. This word is also used to indicate that someone is “fierce, ferocious, cruel”. If we read the passage in the light of the second definition, Williams is giving nature a characteristic that is usually attributed to people or animals. Thus, once more, it is presented here as a kind of terrifying creature that acts willingly with cruelty and violence. It becomes a deadly force: “All is tremendous and awful. Here no pines wave their lofty heads, no mountain shrubs display their simple flowrets, nor does even a blade of weed betray the possibility of existence to anything that breathes” (I, 155). This landscape here is completely barren, and all the beautiful aspects of nature seem to be forbidden here. There is no “possibility of existence” as if nature itself was preventing every living thing from growing.

Eventually, nature ends up being represented as hell. Williams is capable of seeing the hand of a supernatural being, but, as opposed to what she describes in “A Hymn”, in this case it is a diabolic creation. When Williams regards nature in this manner she recalls Milton and Homer and writes that if they had seen this landscape, they “would have caught some new images of the savage and terrific, and their hells would have been habitations less desirable” (I, 158). Williams describes what she has observed in this place as “new images of the savage and terrific”, as if there was no natural scenery as terrible as this one. Nature then, becomes even more terrifying than hell. She uses the word “desirable” when referring to Homer’s and Milton’s hell, which could be read as if she even preferred to be in those terrible places described by them than in this place, exalting her feeling of terror. In the eighteenth century Milton was considered the greatest English poet, an admiration that was continued by the Romantics. For example, William Wordsworth thoroughly annotated his own personal copy of Milton’s work, something that shows his depth in it. *Paradise Lost* (1667) was

not only influential on male authors, female writers, such as the actress Sara Siddons, and Eliza Bradun produced abridgements and paraphrases of it (Trott: 1998, 521). Another example is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), whose epigraph is drawn for *Paradise Lost*. Adding to this, the monster actually reads Milton's work and identifies himself with the fallen angel. One aspect of this epic that fascinated the Romantics was the character of Satan and the demonic elements. As Peter A. Shock explains in *Romantic Satanism*, "the Romantic age exhibits a resurgent fascination with the satanic" (2003: 2) along with a reinterpretation of Milton's Satan. Although Williams does not refer specifically to Satan, she shows in this passage an interest in demonical and evil forces. She chooses to mention Milton in this passage, something that shows how she is taking part in this tradition, which was becoming increasingly popular in the Eighteenth Century and reached its crowning point in the Romantic tradition.

Williams then visits the Devil's Bridge, a narrow bridge built to cross the gulf. This structure is built inside the steep landscape of the Alps. She reaches it "After winding for some time among these awful scenes, of which no painting can give an adequate description, and of which an imagination the most pregnant in sublime horrors could form but a very imperfect idea" (I,160). Williams here seems to be exaggerating the horror of this experience to create a very dramatic effect on the reader. The imagination, which is the driving force in the previous passages dedicated to natural landscapes, falls short here. The terrors of this place go beyond what a human mind can think of. The only entity capable of conceiving this place as a supernatural one is the devil. She calls the place, "another operation of Satanic power" (I, 160) and a "supernatural work" (I,160). Again, she associates this place with Milton's description of hell in *Paradise Lost*. She explains that the rocks on which the bridge is built, are "as solid foundations for bridge building as 'the aggregated soil, solid, or slimy,' which was

collected amidst the waste of chaos, and crowded drove 'from each side shoaling towards the mouth of hell'" (i, 161). Williams uses Milton's words to present this scenery as a hellish place. Williams wrote that paintings could not accurately represent the sublime horrors of this place before it attracted the attention of William Turner, who was fascinated by turbulent nature. He chose this place as the subject of several of his paintings (see appendix): "The Devil's Bridge, St Gothard" (1803-4) (Fig. 1), "The Devil's Bridge and Schöllenen Gorge" (1802) (Fig. 2), "The Schöllenen Gorge from the Devil's Bridge, Pass of St Gotthard" (1802) (Fig.3), "The Devil's Bridge, St Gothard" (1841-3) (Fig. 4), "The St Gothard Pass at the Devil's Bridge" (1830-5) (Fig. 5), "The Passage of Mount St Gothard, Taken from the Centre of the Teufels Broch (Devil's Bridge), Switzerland" (1804) (Fig. 6). The fact that he dedicated several paintings to it, indicates the great effect that this landscape had for him, since he continued painting it decades after having visited it. In "The Devil's Bridge, St Gothard" (1803-4), he paints tiny human figures crossing the bridge. The smallness of these figures offers a contrast with the greatness of the mountains and the river. Williams was doing so with her writing, which may indicate how nature invites artists to think about the smallness of human life and the greater power of nature.

Williams enters the dark when she traverses a tunnel in order to cross the mountain. She presents it as a dreadful experience and her imagination is involved in making it even more so. Burke also linked the Sublime to obscurity:

The entrance into this subterraneous passage is almost dark, and the little light that penetrates through a crevice in the rock, serves only to make its obscurity more visible. Filled with powerful images of the terrible and sublime, from the enormous objects which I had been contemplating for some hour past, objects, the forms of which were new to my imagination, it was not without a feeling of reluctance that I plunged into this scene of night, whose thick gloom heightened every sensation of terror. (I, 163)

The ideas of terror are still vivid in her mind. As a result, she is able to perceive things differently. This passage happens during night-time, which emphasizes the frightening aspect of the scene, it heightens “every sensation of terror”. Night-time is a time of darkness when the abilities of perception are reduced. Thus, everything becomes more dangerous and things that are not real seem to become possible. However, while senses diminish, the imagination spreads. It is interesting how light enters the tunnel just make obscurity “more visible”, as alluding to Milton “No light but rather darkness visible” (2005 [1667]: I, 63). During the Enlightenment, light was used to symbolize and emphasize reason. Light and darkness were opposing forces, where the former had positive connotations and the latter negative ones. However, in this passage light does not calm the feelings of terror but it emphasizes them, having the opposite effect. Shade and light transform the imagination. The same idea that appears in *Julia* is explored in more detail in *Tour in Switzerland*.

When Williams has just crossed the tunnel, the nature she observes is again similar to the beautiful one than she described in the beginning:

After passing through this cavern, the view which suddenly unfolded itself appeared rather a gay illusion of the fancy than real nature. No magical wand was ever fabled to shift more instantaneously the scene, or call up forms of more striking contrast to those on which we had gazed. On the other side of the cavern we seemed amidst the chaos or the overthrow of nature; on this we beheld her drest in all the loveliness of infancy or renovation, with every of the soft and tranquil beauty. (I, 163)

After having described a terrifying nature and a Burkean sublime, she suddenly finds again a beautiful and calming nature, as the one in *Julia*. However, this experience does not give the impression of being real since Williams constantly makes references to the imagination and fantastic elements. In the first sentence, she explains how the nature that she finds now seems to be more an illusion than real. This sudden change may be attributed to magic and the supernatural. She uses the word ‘fancy’, which was

commonly used by the Romantics to refer to creative capacities. She draws the contrast between the two types of nature, one is 'chaotic' and the other one 'soft', 'tranquil' and 'beautiful'. This is comparable to the differentiation that was presented by Burke in his aesthetic theory, which was at the time a subject of debate. The debate around the distinction between the categories of beautiful during the eighteenth and nineteenth Century resulted in a rigorous and defined distinction between these two aesthetic categories. This might explain why the change between the two ways of perceiving nature is so harsh in Williams' book, who was probably aware of the ongoing debate. After experiencing the terror and the sublime, Williams goes back to the nature of sensibility. A similar scene happens the following day, "the scene no longer exhibited the savage horrors of the chaos we had traversed the preceding day, the road was neither extremely rapid nor dangerous, everywhere we beheld vegetation" (I, 171). Williams' perception of nature is pleasant again. This tension between the two different points of view emphasizes how it is seen through the eyes of the imagination. We do not now, as readers, which of the two descriptions of the same landscape is the real one, but it shows how imagination shapes and changes the perception of the writer.

Williams closes *Tour in Switzerland* with a short conclusion. In this section, she explains how she has been disappointed by the urban life and politics that she has found there. In the eighteenth century, Switzerland was considered an epitome of political freedom. By contrast, Williams describes it as a country "where everything is arbitrary; when liberty, of which so vain a boast has been made, is so little understood" (II, 183). After all, Williams's aim is to defend the ideas of the French Revolution that she finds absent in Switzerland. For the most part of the conclusion, she writes about political matters. However, the last paragraphs talk about nature. As she anticipated in the first chapter, she has been disappointed by the social life and politics that are presented

initially as her main concern, while she has been surprised by the natural landscape that she has found:

If we find its governments defective, or its societies dull, there is always a resource against every feeling of dislike, or of weariness, in the meditation of that glorious scenery, the view of which renders the mind insensible to human evils, by lifting it beyond their reach. Switzerland has opened to me a new world of ideas; its landscapes are indelibly impressed upon my memory; whenever the delightful images of nature present themselves to my imagination, I find that I have been thinking only of Switzerland. (II, 186)

In this passage, Williams goes back to the idea of nature as a place to sooth moral discomfort, “a resource against every feeling of dislike”. This is similar to the beginning of her *Tour*, where William's explains that her intention is to turn to nature in order to ease her mind from the discomfort and persecution that she faced in Paris. However, although nature here is again calming it also presents a sense of sublimity, since the mind in lifted beyond human concerns. This shows how the experiences she has gone through have left a strong impression, creating the “new image of nature” that she describes earlier. Now Williams claims that “Switzerland has opened to me a new world of ideas”, a new way of understanding nature, but possibly literature as well. She has been able to experience on her own what other authors had written about Swiss landscapes. As a result, this experience is marked forever in her memory. After travelling to a new country, she has found the comfort that she was looking for, but, at the same time this experience was different from what she had anticipated.

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation has looked into the transition between two literary movements, Sensibility and Romanticism, as they coalesce in the work of Helen Maria Williams. Most of the critical literature I have reviewed for my analysis categorize Williams' production in broad terms either as Sensibility or Romanticism, but does not pay enough attention to the tensions that permeate her work. I have traced a progressive change in her writing towards a Romantic expression that is often encoded in the language of sensibility. Although her only novel *Julia* displays the form and prototypical episodes of the tradition of sensibility, the novel detaches itself from the typical pattern of the female heroine looking for a husband. The novel already points towards several Romantic elements, such the examination of the protagonist's inner feelings and a rapport with the environment that integrates elements of the Sublime in nature and the faculties of the imagination. These elements are further developed in Williams' *Tour in Switzerland*. The exploration of the author's subjectivity, imagination, and the experience of the Sublime contained in the chapters devoted to the description of nature resonate with an aesthetics of Romanticism. At the same time, Williams still cultivates the themes of the literature of sensibility in her *Tour* and focuses for the most part on the social and political situation of Switzerland. Chris Jones points out that "Williams well knew the common ploys of sentimental discourse and often employed them strategically to deflect criticism" (2000: 95). The result of my research leads me to conclude that, although in most cases Williams applies the rhetoric of sensibility, the essence of the content anticipates Romantic elements. Her work presents a dialogue between these two movements, which creates a tension in her texts. This leads me to

question the extent to which the literature of Sensibility and Romanticism can essentially be compartmented into two different set of categories.

Williams' approach to nature goes beyond pastoral representations even if it may originally derive from it. At first, nature seems to have a soothing effect in both works. Both Julia and Helen Maria Williams herself turn to nature so as to alleviate their emotional distress. Interestingly, the contemplation of nature stimulates intense feelings, resulting in an energetic and agitating experience. The senses are preeminent in these passages, since the vision of the natural elements and the sounds they produce evoke powerful emotions. At the same time, imagination alters the perception of nature. Before visiting the actual landscape, both the protagonist in *Julia* and the narrator in *Tour in Switzerland* have pictured this scenery in their imagination. Nature also serves as a source of inspiration for poetical creation. Examples of these are Julia's "Ode to Poetry" in which she explicitly attributes to nature the ability to inspire her poems. In *Tour in Switzerland*, Williams emphasizes how she has composed her "A Hymn Written Among the Alps" inspired by the observation of the wild natural scenery. She chooses a commonplace location in Romantic literature, the Alpine landscape. Fay considers that this poem "helps to locate this work [*Tour in Switzerland*] as Romantic with its meditation on the sublime, a necessary experience for the true traveller on the Romantic path originated by Goethe" (2015: 85). Besides, Williams seems to prefer for these scenes a wild and rustic landscape reminiscent of a Wordsworthian type.

I have also considered in my analysis the representation of slightly different types of Sublime in nature. In *Julia*, we find a sense of sublimity that leaves the heroine speechless. Besides, the idea that this experience uplifts the mind already appears. Still, the reaction of the protagonist to it involves, to a certain extent, the outward expression of feelings. I have also observed that Julia is fascinated by dangerous and frightening

locations, which seems contradictory to her pursuit of moral comfort. These emotions are further interiorized in *Tour in Switzerland*. She moves away from “the sublime of radical sensibility [that] looked to an extension of human faculties, especially of the ‘social passions’ that would realise new forms of society” (Jones, 2000: 93-4), which is represented in *Letters from France*. In the eleventh chapter of *Tour in Switzerland*, the sublime experience becomes closer to the Burkean model and Williams shows an interest in the demonic aspect of nature. The main difference between the works that I have analysed is that *Tour in Switzerland* is narrated from a first-person perspective, since it belongs to the genre of travel writing and describes autobiographical episodes. The autobiographical context of the work allows her to engage in a self-focused subjective experience. In the passages devoted to political and social issues, Williams presents a voice directed towards society, in line with the literature of sensibility. When it comes to nature, Williams looks for her own individualized voice.

Julia’s subjectivity also articulates the poems that are interspersed within the narration. The narration still takes into account the heroine’s external qualities and her relation to society, but she is put on a higher position to the rest of the characters. At first, this pre-eminence is visible in her outer characteristics, such as her beauty and manners. Later on, she is presented as having a superior mind and understanding. This is highlighted when Julia repeatedly avoids social gatherings and prefers solitude, which allows her to cultivate her interiority. In *Tour in Switzerland*, Williams constructs a representation of herself as a writer. She compares herself with her travel companions, and she stands out for being the one who can feel strong emotions in the contemplation of nature. She also chooses to isolate herself from the rest of the group to be able to contemplate nature on her own. In one of those moments she produces her poem “A Hymn Written Among the Alps”. The heroine in *Julia* and Williams’ own

representation as writer in *Tour in Switzerland* show a special understanding of the world which is not only restricted to individual experiences. The superior benevolence and selflessness of the protagonist is also given central attention, especially in the display of charity. This constitutes a central characteristic of the heroines of sensibility. Thus, the representation of the self in Williams not only shows a continuity in the tradition of sensibility, since the late eighteenth-century tradition that focuses on the character's inner morals and conduct is still relevant, but she also places the emphasis on an internalization of subjectivity that is more consistent with the Romantic spirit.

Society and politics are central themes in all the writings by Williams that lay the basis of her identity as a woman and a writer. She was influenced, as most other women writers of her time, by the political upheavals that she witnessed in France. It was impossible not to be influenced by them or not to position oneself in favour or against them. In the case of Williams, my analysis suggests a growing awareness in her texts that life is political as well as personal, or that our personal choices cannot be devoid of political considerations. In addition to Williams' well-known interest in the French Revolution, I also find a feminist concern in her writing. However, unlike other women writers of the eighteenth century she does not overtly take a stance on the issue. These feminist ideals appear in her translation -or rather rewriting- of Rousseau, which according to Eleanor Ty "can be read as a strong statement against patriarchy, and an effort to escape conventional roles designed by society for women" (1993: 73). Adding to this, Julia's receives the same education as father, instead of the specific learning devoted to women in the eighteenth century. Julia's education in the novel is close to Wollstonecraft's plan on education. Williams and Wollstonecraft knew each other in France and they exchanged letters. For my work, I have not included an analysis of the

correspondence between Wollstonecraft and Williams, although I consider it a possible research line in the future.

For further research, I would like to analyse Williams' shaping of a more elaborated feminist thought that is articulated in other of her works and from different political sensibilities (whether politically radicalized or conservative), as well as the exchanges between her and Wollstonecraft. Williams participated in several salons – with different degrees of social success– and kept a lively network of international connections with other women writers that I could not possibly deal with in my present work. This dissertation has been my first attempt to a more complete study of Williams' literature. These extended lines of research may lead to a further consideration of Williams within the tradition of Romantic literature. In this regard, I agree with Mark Ledden's claim: "Narrow conceptualizations of Romanticism as a male dominated phenomenon have obscured a rich tradition of women's writing" (1994-5: 38). In more general terms, I deem it interesting to further the study of the fluctuations and cross-pollination between the literature of sensibility and Romanticism. These two movements focus on themes such as the expression of feelings or the contemplation of nature, although they approach it in a different way. Emotion holds one of the keys to determine the extent to which Romanticism entailed a complete reaction against its previous literary tradition or a natural evolution from them.

For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.

Virginia Woolf
A Room of One's Own

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APPENDIX

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Joseph Mallord William Turner

Figure 1. **The Devil's Bridge, St Gothard** 1803-5

Oil paint on canvas

768 x 628 mm

Private Collection



Joseph Mallord William Turner

Figure 2. **The Devil's Bridge and Schöllenen Gorge** 1802

Graphite, watercolour and gouache on paper

471 x 318 mm

Tate Collection



Joseph Mallord William Turner

Figure 3. **The Schöllenen Gorge from the Devil's Bridge, Pass of St Gotthard 1802**

Graphite, watercolour and gouache on paper

470 x 314 mm

Tate Collection



Joseph Mallord William Turner

Figure 4. **The Devil's Bridge, St Gothard** 1841-3

Watercolour, pen and ink, graphite and scratching out on paper

238 x 305 mm

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge



Joseph Mallord William Turner

Figure 5. **The St Gothard Pass at the Devil's Bridge** 1830-5

Graphite, watercolour and scraping on paper

232 x 289 mm

The National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh



Joseph Mallord William Turner

Figure 6. **The Passage of Mount St Gothard, Taken from the Centre of the Teufels**

Broch (Devil's Bridge), Switzerland 1804

Watercolour and scraping out on paper

989 x 686 mm

Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, Cumbria, England