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Hunt, S. (2008) Friends of our captivity: nature, terror and refugia in romantic women's literature. In: Reus, T. and Usandizaga, A., eds. (2008) *Inside Out Women negotiating, subverting, appropriating public and private space*. (4) Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 273-296. ISBN 9789042024410

We recommend you cite the published version.

The publisher's URL is <http://www.rodopi.nl/senj.asp?BookId=SPATIAL?4>

Refereed: Yes

(no note)

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Friends of our Captivity: Nature, Terror and Refugia in Romantic Women's Literature

Stephen E. Hunt

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the way that four Romantic women writers confronted perilous situations involving physical captivity, personal trauma and depression through engagement with the natural world. Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith accompanied their husbands in the King's Bench debtors' prison. Helen Maria Williams was held captive in the Luxembourg Prison in Robespierre's France. Mary Wollstonecraft also experienced and survived the Paris of the Terror but suffered protracted depression that culminated in two suicide attempts in the years that followed. Resilience, derived from engagement with the natural world and transformed by the literary imagination, helped these writers to cope with intensely threatening and disempowering spaces. Robinson, Smith and Williams in particular reiterate their desire for shared experience of the natural world. Such writings provide a counterpoint to more familiar Rousseauan and Wordsworthian evocations of the natural world, often predicated on the masculine convention of the solitary wanderer. For example, a letter by Charlotte Smith fondly embraces the reassuring familiarity of the countryside and reunion with her family in a single conceit. While such a gendered distinction between the mutual and the solitary appreciation of nature is complicated by Wollstonecraft's autobiographical essays, these also strive to open up imaginative space for recuperation by negotiating the border between the natural and cultural.

Keywords: Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft, Romanticism, French Revolution, natural environment, resilience, prison, well-being.

This chapter explores the depiction of "natural" spaces in adverse situations in selected late-eighteenth century writings. In the excerpts that follow, by Mary Robinson (1758–1800), Charlotte Smith (1749–1806), Helen Maria Williams (1761–1827) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), contemplation of the natural environment and attention to non-human species become intimately connected with ideas concerning human well-being, improvement and consolation. To

step out into the English countryside or the woods surrounding Paris during the Terror was to distance themselves from the intense personal and political turmoil of their lives and times, yet also to inspire writings that step into central debates about sensibility and rationalism.

In canonical masculine texts such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, solitary encounters with the natural world have come to define a central theme in the Romantic tradition. At the same time less attention has been paid to appreciation of scenery and feeling for other species in Romantic women's literature. Here, however, the argument is developed that Romantic women's writing also offers glimpses of ways in which nature sympathy opens up mental and physical space for resilience and recuperation in circumstances of extreme distress and peril. Robinson, Smith and Williams all endured physical imprisonment and found that natural imagery provided a regenerative power, sustaining the literary imagination. A development from sensibility to a more complex and uneasy engagement with the natural environment can be traced in Wollstonecraft's later writings such as *A Short Residence*, written following a suicide attempt.

The eighteenth century's close is characterised by internecine European war, embittered class conflict accompanying the process of industrialisation and countless narratives of individual hardship. In such circumstances the sentimentalised bucolic idyll represented a popular imaginative space, a cherished image of settled tranquillity, contrary to personal and political upheaval. Marie Antoinette's retreat at the "petit hameau", Trianon, epitomised such an idyll. Here she would dress up as a *faux* shepherdess, away from court gossip and the recriminations of an increasingly hostile population. For her detractors Marie Antoinette's behaviour became synonymous with frivolity and scandal. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, however, Edmund Burke defended her fortitude of character: "she bears the imprisonment of her husband, and her own captivity, and the exile of all her friends [...] with a serene patience" and "the dignity of a Roman matron" (Burke [1790] 1968: 169). This sharply contrasted with the violation of rural space when the "horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell [...] of the vilest of women" occurred during the march from Paris to the Royal estate in the countryside at Versailles (Burke [1790] 1968: 165). Despite its proximity beyond the city's central *quartiers*, the gardens of courtly Versailles are geographically distinct from metropolitan Paris; to tread upon them was to violently break decorum. Among the many ripostes to the *Reflections*, Mary Wollstonecraft deftly reversed the polarity of Burke's rhetoric urging him, "after reviewing this gust of passion, learn to respect the sovereignty of reason" in the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* and

defended urban working women deprived of the “advantages of education” in the *ancien régime* (Wollstonecraft [1790] 1994: 26, 29).

Instances such as Marie Antoinette’s escape to the rigorously sanitised “petit hameau” while the real rural poor suffered longstanding deprivation make it easy to caricature pastoral idealisation as sentimental detachment from harsh social and political realities. However, in what follows a more complex relationship between romantic sensibility and the countryside is apparent in the writings of other incarcerated women. The confines of a prison cell may seem an unexpected and unpromising point of departure for a discussion about engagement with the natural world. However, while the home and its warm flickering hearth, were frequently sanctified as harmonious feminine space, in reality the domestic sphere was often an insecure retreat from social upheaval. Among prominent Romantic women writers, Mary Robinson and Charlotte Smith both spent several months accompanying their husbands in the debtors’ prison, while Helen Maria Williams was taken from her home and detained in captivity in France.

Mary Robinson (and young daughter, Maria) accompanied her husband Thomas Robinson to the King’s Bench prison in 1775 where the family remained for more than nine months (Robinson [1801] 1930: 90). In “Captivity” (1777) Mary Robinson addressed lines to the personified “Tranquillity”:

Permit me, gentle maid, with thee to rove
O'er the wide heath, or in the woodbine grove,

Or to the hospitable cottage, free
To ample Virtue's pure society,
Where innate Goodness, unadorn'd by Art,
At once expands, and dignifies the heart;
Where rural Mirth, and Health go hand in hand,
And joys extatic cheer the rustic band.

(lines 211–18)

By writing such poetry Robinson was able to imaginatively reach out to a space where she was not only liberated from confinement in prison but could escape the demands of social recognition. Such a conceit of rustic liberty is familiar in neo-pastoral verse, a commonplace instance of what Raymond Williams termed the “appeal to simplicity” (Williams 1973: 74). These lines, however, are not a landowning gentleman’s privileged tribute to an idealised rural acreage but an imprisoned woman’s attempt to preserve her mental well-being in a struggle for life and dignity. The King’s Bench prison was known for its filth and squalor, overcrowding and typhus. Poet and playwright Maria Barrell (fl. 1788–90) who

spent five years there, refers to witnessing “scenes of sorrow almost incredible” in *The Captive* (1790) (Todd 1987: 40). Such conditions would have doubled the sense of felicity in imagining the possibilities of roving “far from the town”:

Grant me, indulgent Heaven, a small retreat,
Not idly gay, but elegantly neat;
Free of access for ever be the door,
To the benevolent, and friendless poor;
Far from the town, in some secluded shade,
For blooming Health, and Meditation made;
There would I rove amid the sweets of spring,
And hear the feather'd choir exulting sing,
To view each varied scene, and sweets exhale
Which breathe in every flow'r, in every gale,

Where Nature opes the vegetable scene,
And plenteous fields display a vivid green

.....
Thus let me live, bless'd with a social friend,
In whom good humour and affection blend:
For joys like these, from giddy scenes I'd fly,
To live unenvied, and unknown to die.

(Robinson 1777: lines 227–44)

Ironically the demands of fame were shortly to become particularly exacting given Robinson's public affair with the young Prince of Wales (later George IV). This was prompted by her stage appearance as Perdita, rural maid and heroine of the *Winter's Tale*, which subsequently rendered her one of England's most famous, indeed infamous, women. By 1780 Robinson had thus become situated at the epicentre of metropolitan “giddy scenes”, intimate with the body politic that cartoonists such as James Gillray later caricatured in satirical representations of the Prince of Wales's own overblown body. However, while “Captivity” is a dream of rural seclusion, it celebrates companionship not isolation, and longs for mutual enjoyment of the natural environment. What is imagined is not an individual engagement between the unitary self and the natural world epitomised in the poetry of William Wordsworth and other male Romantic poets. In her verse Robinson desires shared moments and experiences that strengthen intimate relations and affective bonds, rather than unaccompanied confrontations with the sublime. A fertile and cultivated landscape is evoked: one to be enjoyed with “a social friend/In whom good humour and affection blend”.

Subject position is also critical in interpreting the writing of Charlotte Smith. In common with Robinson, Smith's optimistic representations of nature

are a consistent antidote to the unhappiness of her life experience. Her work stresses the positive value and gratification to be enjoyed through contact with the natural world. Charlotte Smith endured a desperate domestic situation. After her wedding she was transplanted from the cherished Sussex countryside of her childhood to live an emotionally isolated existence in Cheapside in “one of the narrowest and most dirty lanes in the city” (Dorset [1826] 1929: 307). One consequence of Smith’s disastrous marriage was that (like Robinson less than a decade earlier) she was confined in the King’s Bench prison, to accompany her equally feckless and disloyal husband, Benjamin. Rarely has the sense of imprisonment in a patriarchal relationship appeared so literal. Eventually, Smith made a pragmatic decision that her moral duty to her nine children outweighed any loyalty to the profligate Benjamin. In such circumstances, she was an author who wrote not in spite of, but under compulsion of, destitution. In addition to a substantial output of multi-volume novels and poetry, Smith produced several works on botany, ornithology and other branches of natural history, thus enabling her to keep a step ahead of creditors.

The following letter extract describes the thrilling spatial transition Smith experienced on her release from prison in 1784. Her account of “misery”, “vice” and “terror” are corroborated by Joanna Innes’s fascinating study of the life and organisation of the King’s Bench prison which recorded that of the 570 prisoners held in 1791, 340 had wives and children living with them at least occasionally. Innes further notes that prison reformer John Howard estimated male-to-female ratios to be 19:1 (in 1779) and 25:1 (in 1782), thus indicating the extent to which this was a predominantly male environment (Innes 1980: 263). The occasion of her departure signified not only Smith’s reunion with her children but also joy in returning to her beloved Sussex downlands. There can be no clearer documentation of the natural environment’s capacity to replenish and bring about a sense of reintegration in contrast to the worst urban dislocation. As she wrote in 1784:

For more than a month I had shared the restraint of my husband in a prison, amidst scenes of misery, of vice, and even of terror.[...] After such scenes and such apprehensions, how deliciously soothing to my wearied spirits was the soft pure air of the summer’s morning, breathing over the dewy grass, as (having slept one night on the road) we passed over the heaths of Surrey. My native hills at length burst upon my view. I beheld once more the fields where I had passed my happiest days, and, amidst the perfumed turf with which one of those fields was strewn, perceived with delight the beloved group, from whom I had been so long divided. (Ch. Smith 2003: 5–6)

Smith’s beloved “native hills” are remembered not for solitary rambles but for the associations they have with her happy upbringing and present family. As such

they represent a desirable continuity in her life, after the radical disjunction of the prison regime which substituted “terror” for kinship and friendship. This is not genteel rural retirement but a euphoric expression of liberation experienced visually and through synaesthesia. Love of place is intimately linked here to love of family; both types of affective bonding become mutually reinforcing. In such instances there is a companionate engagement with the countryside. Women writers such as Robinson and Smith present a relational self in contrast to the individualised unitary self, familiar in Wordsworthian poems such as “Daffodils”, in which William famously wandering “lonely as a cloud”, removes the presence of Dorothy upon whose diary entry the verse is based.

Charlotte Smith’s exhilaration upon reaching the Sussex countryside following captivity was matched by Helen Maria Williams’s pleasurable refuge in the rural environs of Paris after being released from the Luxembourg Prison during the Terror. Smith described the beauty of the natural world, as a “soft, pure” and “soothing” space away from the “terror” suffered in gaol. For Williams too, the natural world existed as a place of familiarity and sanctuary in sharp contrast to the oppressive realities of city life. Poet Richard Polwhele (1760–1838) singled out both Smith and Williams and also Mary Wollstonecraft for their “gallic licentiousness” and subversion of the natural order due to their interest in botany in his popular anti-Jacobin verse diatribe *The Unsex’d Females* (1798: 19). As Alan Bewell argues in “Jacobin Plants”, commendations by radical authors made botany seem dangerously Jacobin during the reactionary aftermath of the French Revolution (1989: 132). The study was morally suspect because its chief exponent, Rousseau, was held to be an inspiration for revolution, complicit in a way of looking at the world that culminated in sexual wantonness and regicide.

Such an image was substantiated by the promotion of Rousseau’s close friend and disciple, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre as director of the Jardin des Plantes and the Muséum Nationale d’Histoire Naturelle during the Terror.¹ In her autobiographical *Letters from France*, Williams records that she had been in a “fairy land” evoked by a conversation with Bernardin, when she was interrupted by news that foreign nationals were to be arrested by state decree (H. W. Williams [1795–96] 1975: II.i.6). This self-representation as someone inhabiting a fable illustrates Angela Keane’s observation that, throughout, the *Letters from France* are factual yet dramatized and even set within a “romance frame” (Keane 1992: 280). The rhetorical devices of sensibility are brought to bear on an extreme situation in which Williams’s personal accounts of contemporary events appear to merge with Gothic fiction. After a sleepless night a sense of

¹ See Roy McMullen’s introduction to *Botany, A Study of Pure Curiosity*: by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1979: 19.

bathos set in as Williams assumed that, together with her mother and sisters, Persis and Cecilia, they were to be spared as female *citoyennes*. The call from the commissaries of the revolutionary committee therefore dealt a second shock of the unexpected the following night. Williams recollected the terror and panic of the moment of her arrest as partially connected details which, in retrospect, she curiously visualized as a picturesque landscape in spots of time:

Sometimes, under the pressure of a great calamity, the most acute sensations are excited by little circumstances which form a part of the whole, and serve in the retrospect of memory, like certain points in a landscape, to call up the surrounding scenery: such is the feeling with which I recall the moments when, having got out of our apartments, we stood upon the stair-case surrounded with guards [...] (H. W. Williams [1795–96] 1975: II.i.9)

Williams was further disappointed to discover that the apartment used as their makeshift cell had blocked lower windowpanes. The next morning she managed to mount a table and “saw through our grated windows the beautiful gardens of the Luxembourg”. Gazing upon the “majestic trees” she remarks: “it is scarcely possible to contemplate the beauties of nature without the enthusiastic pleasure which swells into devotion” (H. M. Williams 1795: I.8). Elizabeth A. Bohls draws attention to the strong reminiscence here of the way in which imprisoned Emily St. Aubin seeks consolation in scenery when gazing from a Gothic prison in Ann Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*, published the previous year (Bohls 1995: 132). In artfully constructed representations inspired by the picturesque landscapes of Salvator Rosa and Claude Lorraine, Emily looks out upon sparkling mountain streams rushing through sunlit woods. Such shimmering movement, light and colour contrasts dramatically with her present predicament, as she is held in a gloomy casement against her will. This disjunction represents Emily’s inner conflict; as her mind recovers its strength she is spiritually revived by the sublimity of the natural world that eases her sense of apprehension and psychic anguish. It seems that Williams recognised all too literal parallels between Emily’s fictional situation and her own vulnerability and loss of freedom. Williams subsequently used the figure of a beautiful landscape to come to terms with her embittered experiences of prison life. A striking passage recounts how a picturesque tapestry inspired her to contemplate the beauties of nature, thereby using imaginative power to gain some respite from captivity:

To be seated at the foot of those sheltering hills which embosomed some mimic habitations, or beneath a mighty elm which rose majestically in the fore-ground of the piece, and spread its thick foliage over a green slope, appeared to me to the summit of earthly felicity. (H. W. Williams [1795–96] 1975: II.i.37)

Unfortunately, the process of association and the consolation prompted by this “pleasing illusion” became inversely mirrored long after Williams had attained her freedom. The pleasures of imagining the verdant outside when inside also unhappily made her recall being inside when outside. So persistent was the effect of this tapestry of the elm that Williams found, because her imagination had become “disordered”, that she later responded to scenes of natural beauty by remembering her incarceration. While subsequently traveling in Switzerland the discovery of a “towering elm”, immediately called to mind the tapestry and the familiar trees of the Luxembourg gardens because it “resembled the friend of my captivity” (H. M. Williams 1795: III.20). Williams attributes the idea of such a process of recall and association to Mark Akenside’s *Pleasures of the Imagination* (1744).

Another friend in captivity was the dog that accompanied a fellow Englishwoman in a neighbouring cell, appearing to share her melancholy (H. M. Williams 1795: III.14). Kindness to dogs and other animals was also a feature of the sensibility demonstrated in Williams’s novel, *Julia* ([1790] 1995). Both Williams and Charlotte Smith made progressive arguments for attention to the welfare of non-humans for their own sakes and as a vital stage in the creation of a more humane society. Williams and writers such as Catharine Macaulay went so far as to extend legal protection and rights to other species (Macaulay 1996: 277; Kennedy 2002: 169). In Wollstonecraft’s *Original Stories*, instilling the virtues of kindness to animals is a key aspect in bringing children up to be “rational creatures” (Wollstonecraft [1788] 1989: IV. 370). Paul Davies suggests that “compassion is the link between the mystical and political wings” of Romanticism (Davies 1998: 91).

A further imaginative device that helped Williams to transcend the compressed space of her existence within walls was to count passing days of captivity by using Philippe Fabre d’Églantine’s new revolutionary calendar – with its allusion to vegetative fertility rites in the changing weather, flowers and harvesting – because its “appellations [...] bring to the mind images of nature, which in every aspect has some power of giving pleasure” (H. M. Williams 1795: III.103). While she was confined she also began to translate Bernardin’s novel *Paul et Virginie*, to which she contributed new poems on sensibility and natural history.²

When describing her release following two months of imprisonment, Williams sets up a polarized contrast between the pastoral space to which she retreats outside the city, and zones which still held danger because of their proximity to the ongoing violence of political persecution. Williams undertakes a

² See introduction to H. M. Williams ([1790] 2001: 25) and Kennedy (2002: 122–25).

sustained engagement with Burke in which she explores the implications of the revolutionary events themselves through figurative representations of the sublime and the beautiful (Blakemore 1997: Chapter 11). Two highly charged spaces are opposed in a series of substantial distinctions; never has the contrast between city and country been so extreme. The defilement of humanity and sense of horror in the city woods is sharply counterpointed to the open pastoral terrain to which Williams escapes.

Enclosed woodland environments are often threatening spaces for women, and again in this instance there is a familiar gendered distinction between the sublime and the beautiful. These woods are associated not only with the terror of the dangerous characters that inhabit them but directly with the Terror as an historical and political moment:

We no longer dared, as we had done the preceding year, to forget awhile the horrors of our situation by wandering occasionally amidst the noble parks of St. Cloud, the wild woods of Meudon, or the elegant gardens of Bellevue, all within an hour's ride of Paris. Those seats, once the residency of fallen royalty, were now haunted by vulgar despots, by revolutionary commissaries, by spies of the police, and sometimes by the sanguinary decemvirs themselves. Often they held their festive orgies in those scenes of beauty, where they dared to cast their polluting glance on nature, and tread with profane steps her hallowed recesses. Even the revolutionary jury used sometimes on a decadi, the only suspension from their work of death, to go to Marly or Versailles; and, steeped as they were to the very lips in blood, without being haunted by the mangled spectres of those whom they had murdered the preceding day, they saw nature in her most benign aspect, pleading the cause of humanity and mercy, and returned to feast upon the groans of those whom they were to murder on the morrow. (H. W. Williams [1795–96] 1975: II.ii.2–3)

The former Royal estates are emphatically personified as female nature. Once “noble”, “wild”, and “elegant”, they have now been subjected to the violation expressed by the syntactic antagonism between “profane” and “hallowed”. The physical presence of the “despots” is impressed upon the degradation and disenchantment of a now fallen countryside, itself a victim toppled by the sweep of history as surely as any political dynasty.³ Steven Blakemore suggests that Williams might be inferring a “repetitive link between the Jacobins and the Old Regime” (Blakemore 1997: 189). In Williams’s terrorized woods enchantment is

3 Simon Schama records that many French woodlands were decimated during the Revolutionary Wars. The relaxation of the old customs and codes of the *ancien régime* left the woods vulnerable to the uncontrolled grazing of livestock and caused the boles of the trees to meet the blades of a rural populace desperate for fuel (1995: 180).

destroyed by sacrilege: “the fairy scenes have been polluted, the wizard bowers profaned” (H. W. Williams [1795–96] 1975: II.iii.85). She repeatedly sets up an opposition in which the contours of pleasure and pain are traced through natural imagery.

It is clear that, however beautiful nature may be, in such an extreme political situation it is human presence that defines nature; nature does not have the transformative power to change sensibility or lead to the love of humankind. Although the regime’s functionaries might still enjoy the opportunity for repose in the parks, they have become so desensitized that their response is limited and they are closed to the moral and humanitarian benefits of nature that is the Romantic standard of the civilized being. Ironically, it is Williams’s personified nature that pleads the cause of humanity because such inhumane humans are no longer unable to do so.

By contrast, the open country to which Williams retreats with her family is safer, although they continue to endure rigorous surveillance. This more open terrain is bucolic, “unfrequented”, though not unpopulated because of the presence of a single shepherd. Williams’s delight at reaching such countryside is not the abandoned experience of the solitary wanderer but pleasure in finding a space subject to less official control in which she can enjoy stolen and shared moments with her mother and sisters. Williams’s contradictory feelings and anxieties about the course of revolutionary events are displaced onto the natural environment in sharply defined dystopian and utopian spaces. The space of refugia is constructed in terms of the beautiful and is described in terms such as: “charming variety”, “soothing”, “graces”, “congenial”, “delicious fragrance”, “stillness”, “soft rustling”. The environs of Paris, safer than the city centre, are constructed as a place where the self, suffering a psychic pain that would now be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress syndrome, can grieve, recuperate and begin to heal:

The hills were fringed with clouds, which still reflected the fading colours of the day; the woods were in deep shadow; a soft veil was thrown over nature, and objects indistinctly seen were decorated by imagination with those graces which were most congenial to the feelings of the moment. The air was full of delicious fragrance, and the stillness of the scene was only disturbed by sounds the most soothing in nature, the soft rustling of the leaves, or the plaintive notes of the wood-pigeon. The tears with which the spectacle of the guillotine had petrified with horror now flowed again with melancholy luxury. (H. W. Williams [1795–96] 1975: II.ii.9)

This description of being lulled and immersed or enfolded in nature is suggestive of a foetal cocooning, an effect enhanced by the sibilance of words such as “soothing”, and the repetition of “soft”. In an exploration of female metaphors of

landscape in American literature, Annette Kolodny, while conscious of the limitations of such representations of women as nature, argues that “the mother’s body, as the first ambience experienced by the infant, becomes a kind of archetypal primary landscape to which subsequent perceptual configurations of space are related” (Kolodny 1975: 156). Williams’s sense of a comfortable, though temporary and provisional dwelling in the land recalls, again in Kolodny’s words, “the parameters of the original home, the maternal embrace (or even, perhaps, the womb)” (ibid: 152). This primal sense of physical security and well-being is given great emphasis in Gaston Bachelard’s discussion of human hiding-places and homely dwellings that echo nests and burrows in which “physically, the creature endowed with a sense of refuge huddles up to itself, takes to cover, hides away, lies snug, concealed” (Bachelard [1958] 1994: 91).

Williams’s demonstration of her own continued ability to respond sensitively and imaginatively to the natural environment implicitly enables her to distinguish herself from the bloodthirsty excesses of the Terror and the state apparatus in a society riven by class conflict. Able to weep once more, her humane response elevates her as a moderate in touch with the sights, scents and sounds of the hills and woods, and thus morally distanced from the violence and corruption of Robespierre’s regime. The space enables Williams to become human again, not frozen with terror as she had earlier been as an eyewitness of political executions. Williams’s reluctance to leave France and to lapse into reaction and Francophobia, despite her profound disillusionment with this regime, leads to the doubling of a sense of exile. She had betrayed her origins according to nationalist discourse, because she was situated on the opposite side of an embattled geographical and political boundary. Williams adapted the conventionally private genre of the letter into a public form, and so faced accusations by critics at home, such as Laetitia Hawkins that, as a woman, she was transgressing propriety by speaking out as a political commentator on public events (Keane 1992: 287). She also went into internal exile in the French countryside due to her critical and hence vulnerable position outside the power structure of the new body politic.

Williams’s political discourse about nature, which makes use of a language that opposes defilement to purity, became an emblematic displacement of the torments of social division and conflict. Jack Fruchtman notes that the often-generated pairs of oppositions in Williams’s prose, which rhetorically divide nature and anti-nature, reflect the author’s commitment to the Girondins rather than the Jacobin faction of the Convention (Fruchtman 1995: 228–29). However, such oppositions can be fluid and, just as the reason and passion of revolutionary *vertu* may overflow into atrocity, Williams’s new-found rural idyll remains dangerously adjacent to the barriers of the city. Even while she,

and her close female relatives, experience intense pleasure in spending time in the countryside, they are aware that their movements are monitored by the state and that they are fugitives who could only risk a return to Paris “on forfeiture of [their] heads”. Furthermore, the pre-lapsarian reaches of the pastoral countryside themselves geographically eclipse the perilous liminal space of the despot-haunted woods.

In 1794 it became expedient to leave France altogether and Williams crossed the border to undertake the writing and botanizing and to experience the sublime that is commemorated in her travelogue *A Tour in Switzerland*. It was not until the overthrow of Robespierre, and the temporary political relaxation of the Directory, that both Williams and the French population were able to emerge from the frozen and barren underworld of the Terror. Regeneration became possible in the blighted land, as if Demeter were allowing the resurgence of seasonal change as *Ventôse* finally gave way to *Germinal*:

Upon the fall of Robespierre, the terrible spell which bound the land of France was broken; the shrieking whirlwinds, the black precipices, the bottomless gulphs, suddenly vanished; and reviving nature covered the wastes with flowers, and the rocks with verdure. (H. W. Williams [1795–96] 1975: II.ii.190)

Acquaintances in revolutionary France, both Helen Maria Williams and Mary Wollstonecraft found themselves in precarious situations as exiles. In Britain they were regarded as politically suspect and morally scandalous due to their extramarital relationships. Within France they became perilously placed due to “counter-revolutionary” Girondist affiliations that caused the execution of several of their associates during the Terror. Both particularly identified with Madame Roland and keenly felt her loss to the guillotine. Their political writings are among many responses to the attack upon the French Revolution in Edmund Burke’s infamous *Reflections*. In the highly charged debates of the 1790s all sides recruited “Nature” as a powerful rhetorical ally, at turns democratic, revolutionary or despotic.

Wollstonecraft was a visitor at Williams’s salon on the Rue Helvétius in 1792. Their participation in the intellectual milieu of the salon created a space for women to debate current affairs beyond the separate spheres imposed by their formal exclusion from political office. Wollstonecraft wrote back to her sister Everina, that

Miss Williams has behaved very civilly to me and I shall visit her frequently, because I *rather* like her, and I meet french company at her house. Her manners are affected, yet the *simple* goodness of her heart continually breaks

through the varnish, so that one would be more inclined, at least I should, to love than admire her.⁴

A complex combination of factors including the traumatic loss of associates during the Terror and personal depression exacerbated by her relationship with Gilbert Imlay culminated in Wollstonecraft's suicide attempt in May 1795. It was in such circumstances that she left for Scandinavia in June, ostensibly as a representative for Imlay's business interests. Imlay is the recipient of the letters in Wollstonecraft's autobiographical travelogue, *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (Wollstonecraft [1796] 1987). Rousseau had provided an immediate model for the trope of wandering and botanizing along in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782).⁵ However, both her daughter Fanny, and French maid Marguerite, accompanied Wollstonecraft throughout the travels described in *A Short Residence*. Furthermore, while Rousseau, and the fashion for sensibility and the pastoral, had inspired *Mary, a Fiction*, Wollstonecraft later moved towards a more critical engagement with these former influences (Wollstonecraft [1788] 1976). By 1796 her attitudes towards rural communities were deeply ambivalent:

Talk not of bastilles! To be born here, was to be bastilled by nature – shut out from all that opens the understanding, or enlarges the heart [...] I felt my breath oppressed, though nothing could be clearer than the atmosphere. Wandering here alone, I found the solitude desirable; my mind was stored with ideas, which this new scene associated with astonishing rapidity. But I shuddered at the thought of receiving existence, and remaining here, in the solitude of ignorance, till forced to leave a world of which I had seen so little; for the character of the inhabitants is as uncultivated, if not as picturesquely wild, as their abode. (Wollstonecraft [1796] 1987: 131)

Wollstonecraft is stimulated with “astonishing rapidity” by the experience of a

4 Letter to Everina Wollstonecraft, 24 December 1792. *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. by Janet Todd (London: Penguin, 2004), 215. The most recent editor of Wollstonecraft's letters, Janet Todd, challenges as unfounded speculations by Roger Ingpen and Ralph Wardle that later comments made to Gilbert Imlay about his former lover as a “cunning woman” refer to an affair with Helen Maria Williams that immediately preceded Wollstonecraft's own relationship with him. See letter to Gilbert Imlay, 20 August 1794, *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. by Janet Todd, 260. Todd is responding to notes in *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. by Ralph M. Wardle (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1979), 260 and 280.

5 In the Penguin edition of Wollstonecraft's *Short Residence*, Richard Holmes notes that *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* was one of Wollstonecraft's favourite books and that the epistolary *Short Residence* was in part modelled on its confessional tone (1987: 282).

solitary stroll in the natural world, and by the images that would impress themselves upon the inner mind. At the same time however, this passage explicitly modifies, and rejects, the idealization of rural life. While occasional solitude may have a beneficial effect upon the human mind, it is coupled with “ignorance” in this passage and associated with the limitation rather than the expansion of individual vision. In an approach antagonistic to that of Wordsworth, Wollstonecraft suggests that rural life cannot be intrinsically efficacious, because the true value of wild nature is most fully appreciated and cherished by the mind cultivated with sensibility, which is most likely to be developed and refined in the social milieu of larger towns. Paradoxically, those that are “bastilled” within wild nature take care to shut out its harshness most determinedly. The rural environment affects character in a negative way that directly contradicts pastoral conventions. The local inhabitants seem compelled to anaesthetize themselves against the outside world, preferring rather to escape into a claustrophobic, hermetically sealed existence: “What, indeed, is to humanise these beings, who rest shut up, for they seldom even open their windows, smoking, drinking brandy, and driving bargains? I have been almost stifled by these smokers”(Wollstonecraft [1796] 1987: 132).

Such comments are redolent of puritan disdain for “unimproving” pleasures and the luxuries of alcohol and nicotine, and tinged with a characteristic distaste for trade. Wollstonecraft’s contemplation of the prospect of living among unenlightened provincialism in such districts inspires in her something approaching horror. Her abhorrence for the behaviour of the rural poor is accentuated when her sensibility is offended by the “infernal appearance” of a country fair, a place leading inevitably she fears to “gross debauch” (Wollstonecraft [1796] 1987: 156). Wollstonecraft’s response anticipates Harriet Martineau, who in a letter to Elizabeth Barrett mocked Wordsworth as oblivious to the way that “sensual vice abounds in rural districts” in the 1840s:

[...] while every Justice of the peace is filled with disgust, & every clergyman with (almost) despair at the drunkenness, quarrelling & extreme licentiousness with women, – here is good old Wordsworth for ever talking of rural innocence, & deprecating any intercourse with towns, lest the purity of his neighbours shd be corrupted. (Browning, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1969: I. 462)

Wollstonecraft was an acute observer, quick to offer a critique of the effects of capitalism upon human sensibility and to recognize the potential conflict between the drive for economic return and the conservation of the natural environment. For centuries mining, forestry and other economic activities had inevitably altered such scenery but now it appeared that the new dynamism in

European commerce was accelerating the destructive impact:

The views of the Elbe, in the vicinity of the town, are pleasant, particularly as the prospects here afford so little variety. I attempted to descend, and walk close to the water edge; but there was no path; and the smell of glue, hanging to dry, an extensive manufactory of which is carried on close to the beach, I found extremely disagreeable. But to commerce every thing must give way; profit and profit are the only speculations – “double – double, toil and trouble.” (Wollstonecraft [1796] 1987: 194)

William Hazlitt later provocatively satirized parochial attitudes in an essay entitled “Character of the Country People” (1819). In particular he despised the lack of cultural feeling for natural beauty he experienced in the Lake District, offering anecdotally, “An artist who was making a sketch of a fine old yew tree in a romantic situation, was asked by a *knowing hand*, if he could tell how many foot of timber it contained?” (Hazlitt [1819] 1930–34: XVII. 68). Critics such as Gary Kelly and Mary Jacobus argue that in Wollstonecraft’s case distaste for commercialism was strongly connected to her disaffection with her relationship to Imlay, whom she felt had been “embruted by trade” (Kelly 1996: 172, 177–79; Jacobus 1995: 76–77). However, it seems that Wollstonecraft was also profoundly disturbed by an incipient awareness of a dilemma that was to constitute a singularly modern conflict. She found herself at once eager to embrace industrial and technological progress as an emancipatory force with the capacity to ameliorate the human condition, yet filled with fascinated horror when confronted with the material reality of the industrial landscape. Wollstonecraft is no proto-deep ecologist, believing anthropocentrically that “the world requires, I see, the hand of man to perfect it” and rejecting a primitivist return to nature in the form of “Rousseau’s golden age of stupidity” (Wollstonecraft [1796] 1987: 121–22). Yet, despite some Promethean enthusiasm, she is candid enough to voice dismay at the physical despoliation entailed in such enterprises. Although it appears to be out-proportioned by its surroundings, the construction of the new canal at Trollhattan in Sweden represented an insolent intrusion upon the landscape for Wollstonecraft, leaving her to regret that “such a noble scene had not been left in all its solitary sublimity” (Wollstonecraft [1796] 1987: 160).

Wollstonecraft’s discursive negotiation of rural districts and “natural” spaces is a sophisticated and complex one. She acknowledged a marked revival of spirits and return of well-being during her sojourn in rural Scandinavia.⁶ In Letter One Wollstonecraft’s mood was uplifted by stark and unpromising landscape:

⁶ This was short-lived and was followed by a further suicide attempt on her return to London (Kelly 1996:176).

The view was sterile: still little patches of earth, of the most exquisite verdure, enamelled with the sweetest wild flowers, seemed to promise the goats and a few straggling cows luxurious herbage. How silent and peaceful was the scene. I gazed around with rapture, and felt more of that spontaneous pleasure which gives credibility to our expectation of happiness, than I had for a long, long time before. I forgot the horrors I had witnessed in France, which had cast a gloom over all nature, and suffering the enthusiasm of my character, too often, gracious God! damped by the tears of disappointed affection, to be lighted up afresh, care took wing while simple fellow feeling expanded my heart. (Wollstonecraft [1796] 1987: 67–68)

Helen Maria Williams portrayed an assault upon a feminized nature, yet found refuge and serenity in the countryside after the violence of the Parisian streets and parks. Here too, the natural environment offers solace in the precise historical moment of the aftermath of the Terror's most oppressive and bloody phase. Her scepticism about the improving qualities of time spent in the countryside coexists with an underlying belief that a cultivated mind, with understanding and compassion, can enjoy benefits foreclosed to those motivated by considerations of status and commercial self-interest. In her writings about nature, Wollstonecraft attempts to construct an elevated form of sensibility that unites the mind and the heart, forging an alliance between rationality, feeling and the imagination – a belief in a radical transition akin to the one she continued to hope for in a revolutionary transformation of the social sphere.

Such ideas are developed further in “On Poetry and Our Relish for the Beauties of Nature” (1797). What was to be Wollstonecraft's final essay illustrates a late-eighteenth century writer's awareness of the importance of subject position in the experience and representation of the natural world. Again adopting the pose of the solitary walker, she both anticipated Wordsworth's programme for “natural” diction and pointed to a number of different forms and qualities of engagement and “relish” for nature.

Wollstonecraft's meditation begins with an acerbic observation that casts some doubt upon those that flaunt their propensity for rural delights. She notes with heavy irony that while wandering alone in the countryside she invariably met no one but the occasional labourer, yet on her return found that “when I joined the social circle, every tongue rang changes on the pleasures of the country” (Wollstonecraft [1797] 1989: VII. 7). This point underlines her scepticism towards the drawing-room dilettantes who might earnestly eulogize the picturesque but in reality avoid the stinging nettles, dishevelled and twigged hair, and muddy boots that inevitably accompany country rambles. Wollstonecraft's sharpness clearly indicates that by this period there is some social capital to be gained from publicly displaying an affection (or rather affectation) for nature, ironically often in the absence of any actual engagement with it. The objects of

Wollstonecraft's disdain have an urban perspective, as "those, who leave, for a season, the crowded cities in which they were bred" (Wollstonecraft [1797] 1989: VII. 7). Such sensibility towards the natural world, as a luxury object of choice, is made possible because there is no longer any necessity to directly work the land which exists as a source of revenue and retreat; a sensibility that therefore reflects rather a degree of *disassociation* from the natural world. The critique of this perspective, characterized as "artificial", rather than a "real perception", and contrasted to the "trudging" of the "labouring man" (Wollstonecraft [1797] 1989: VII. 7), is continuous, therefore, with the strictures against the luxurious, indolent and inauthentic, characteristic of *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and other writings in Wollstonecraft's oeuvre.

Notwithstanding such scepticism, Wollstonecraft places real value upon the beneficial experiences to be gained in natural surroundings and goes on to outline a tripartite schema for possible depths of response to the countryside, thus elucidating a number of different subject positions that might be engaging with the natural world. There are some that merely learn fashionably sublime phrases to impress in society, others that can enjoy the countryside if it is mediated through an artist's eye and, finally, those that respond authentically and directly to nature.

In the first category are those, dismissed as "witlings", whose primary aim in learning about nature is "to enable them to talk" (Wollstonecraft [1797] 1989: VII. 11). Such characters recall the would-be wits of William Congreve's dramas who merely attempt to cultivate the appearance of refinement by learning a selection of *bon mots*. Men, in particular, who learn about natural history to impress were indeed occasionally satirized in women's novels at this time. In Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline*, Bellozane, a Swiss suitor who initially found his aunt's plants the "most boring subjects in the world", quickly begins to study botany when he discovers Emmeline's interest (Smith [1788] 1971: 359–60). Jane Austen captured the type precisely in her unfinished final novel, *Sanditon* (1817), in which Charlotte Heywood, though temporarily amused, quickly becomes bored by Sir Edward Denham's enthusiasms:

He began in a tone of great taste and feeling to talk of the sea and the sea shore – and ran with energy through all the phrases employed in praise of their sublimity, and descriptive of the *undescribable* emotions they excite in the mind of sensibility. – The terrific grandeur of the ocean in a storm, its glassy surface in a calm, its gulls and its samphire, and the deep fathoms of its abysses, its quick vicissitudes, its direful deceptions, its mariners tempting it in sunshine and overwhelmed by the sudden tempest, all were eagerly and fluently touched; – rather commonplace perhaps – but doing very well from the lips of a handsome Sir Edward. (Austen [1817] 1974: 184)

The second category of nature appreciation Wollstonecraft identifies is made up of those whose appreciation for nature is unfeigned, but who lack the capacity for direct spontaneous response. These, “from the want of a lively imagination”, require a poet or painter to mediate and concentrate pleasing views into picturesque prospects to enjoy the countryside (Wollstonecraft [1797] 1989: VII. 10). Wollstonecraft laments the dearth of direct nature observation and in doing so echoes John Aikin’s earlier complaint that “the grand and beautiful objects” of nature which “are the most obvious store of new materials to the poet”, are, in practice, “the store which of all others he has most sparingly touched” (Aikin 1777: 4).

Wollstonecraft more vigorously objects that images from nature are consequently all too often rendered “disgusting, because they have been servilely copied by poets” (Wollstonecraft [1797] 1989: VII. 8–9). “Servile” is a politically charged word and there are echoes of the Platonic condemnation of imitation in this denunciation. The balance between outer nature and inner expression is a delicate one in Wollstonecraft’s argument. While, she suggests, it is permissible, indeed unavoidable and natural, if human concerns should arise in the mind during the course of the contemplation of nature, natural description that is primarily informed by the stock diction and recycled representations often associated with later mimetic Augustan literature is rendered sterile, uninteresting and lacking the spontaneity that Wollstonecraft commends.

Finally, there are those rare individuals able to respond to nature forcefully and spontaneously. Wollstonecraft, by identifying herself as someone who takes part in “solitary rambles”, asserts her own individualist subjectivity and implicitly numbers herself among them. Powerful nature poetry, it is suggested, should be the product of a more direct encounter with natural sublimity. Written in 1797 and thus contemporaneous with the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wollstonecraft’s essay foreshadows the Wordsworthian conception of poetry as powerful feeling, able to express emotions that are not reducible to analytical reason. This is in keeping with later Romantic criticism and further grounds the currency of the ideas of fancy and imagination later to be made the centrepiece of Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*: “The silken wings of fancy are shrivelled by rules; and a desire of attaining elegance of diction, occasions an attention to words, incompatible with sublime, impassioned thoughts” (Wollstonecraft [1797] 1989: VII. 9). Such lines reveal a commitment to the expression of a visionary feeling for nature, one at odds with the supposedly puritanical tone of cool intellectualism that urges the repression of passion in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Wordsworth’s reminder, that the task of the poet to record the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” should be “recollected in tranquillity”,

closely glosses Wollstonecraft's advice that "effusions" ought to be "softened or expunged during the cooler moments of reflection" (Wollstonecraft [1797] 1989: VII. 8). A tension is apparent here which must be resolved if Wollstonecraft's explanation of the "relish for the beauties of nature" is to be logically coherent. Given that evidently "a poet is rather the creature of art, than of nature", the idea of nature as a human textual construct is a paradoxical and troubling one if the positive aspects of Wollstonecraft's argument are to be sustained (Wollstonecraft [1797] 1989: VII. 9).⁷ The latter are threefold: First, that the relish of the natural environment is both a manifestation of, and the occasion to further exercise a lively and discriminating mind; second, the idea that the love of nature leads to devotion to the creator (an argument drawn from natural theology with its Protestant emphasis upon individual accommodation with God); finally, the possibility that nature can address ennui and alienation because it has the capacity to whet the understanding in a civilization in which popular taste has been impaired by sensual overindulgence. Aikin had suggested that there were strong parallels between accuracy of representation and a philosophical truth on the part of the poet and further associated elevated taste with the integrity of empirical experience: "Taste may perhaps be fixed and explained by philosophical investigation; but it can only be *formed* by frequent contemplation of the objects with which it is conversant" (Aikin 1777: 154).

Conceding, in a parenthetical aside, that "*natural* is a very indefinite expression" (Wollstonecraft [1797] 1989: VII. 7), Wollstonecraft indicates that she was conscious that the word was a slippery signifier. It is suggested that the true appreciation of nature is best enjoyed by the poet for whom "the understanding has been enlarged by thought and stored with knowledge" (Wollstonecraft [1797] 1989: VII. 7), a criterion that she realizes may lead to a paradox because it is dependent upon what the human mind can bring with it to nature from culture. The greatest depth of feeling and felicity of expression exists in those that have educated and cultivated themselves, factors that militate against the broader emphasis upon direct experience and spontaneity, and inconveniently imply that the love of nature is *not* natural, at least in the sense of a straightforwardly innate and universally experienced process. There is an optimistic claim that the individual self can be enlarged by an act of will through the accumulation of knowledge, of which the direct experience of the natural environment is but one dimension. In her suggestion that "the poetry written in the infancy of society, is most natural", Wollstonecraft hypothesizes a purity of encounter with the natural environment, an idea which, again, is problematized by her own acknowledgment of the semantic instability of "natural" as a "very indefinite expression".

⁷ The title indicates Wollstonecraft's direct debt to Aikin who spoke of the "relish for the beauties of poetry" (Aikin 1777: 2).

Such a potential contradiction in the love of nature, however, is addressed by analogy to the nature of love. Wollstonecraft consistently employs metaphors of sexual heat and coolness to create a curiously libidized effect in “On Poetry”, contrasting the fickle feeling of the landscape libertine or voluptuary with the quieter yet more enduring “ardour” of the true aesthete and faithful lover of nature. In human relationships the promiscuous and relentless search for extraordinary stimulation leads to an unsatisfactory and frivolous absorption in surface forms:

Gross minds are only to be moved by forcible representations. To rouse the thoughtless, objects must be presented, calculated to produce tumultuous emotions; the unsubstantial, picturesque forms which a contemplative man gazes on, and often follows with ardour till he is mocked by a glimpse of unattainable excellence, appear to them the light vapours of a dreaming enthusiast, who gives up the substance for the shadow. (Wollstonecraft [1797] 1989: VII. 10)

It is the true poet, who profits from inner growth and a deeper understanding, that is best able to relish the subtleties and nuances of experience and emotion when enjoying the countryside. Such an argument extends the purlieu of Wollstonecraft’s early morning stroll in the countryside out to the parameters of her more expansive personal cosmology. True education is a faculty that exists to sharpen critical discrimination and bring about self-improvement. The quality of the enlarged potentiality of the human imagination is preferred to the quantity of knowledge; this is the ability to ground the universal in the particular or to extrapolate the eternal from the immediate, to be attentive to the broader context of knowledge, and to prefer longer term purpose and content to ephemeral desire. True nature poetry is produced by a dynamic interchange between the poet of discrimination and the directly experienced countryside and not by the encyclopaedic learning of stock phrases, correct diction and mechanical rhyming schemes.

This idea that too much artificial green verse may jade the senses recalls familiar strictures upon the excesses of sexual appetite as a consistent theme in Wollstonecraft’s prose. In a letter from Sweden about the manners of country girls she writes “as the mind is cultivated, and taste gains ground, the passions become stronger, and rest on something more stable than the casual sympathies of the moment” (Wollstonecraft [1796] 1987: 83). Wollstonecraft’s passion for the countryside may likewise be more accurately interpreted as emphasizing the concentration rather than the dissipation of human energies rather than the alleged repression of the sensory.

It is apparent then that Wollstonecraft’s ideas about the “beauties of nature” are interwoven with social concerns. She makes use of metaphors of sexuality

and intimates significant variation in the responses of different socio-economic groups to the natural world, reflecting the specific habitus that she attributes to these categories. The celebration of the civilizing consequences of an individual accommodation with the natural environment is articulated through a meritocratic sentiment which critiques both the preoccupations of a leisured urban class that devalues the countryside as a site of retreat and relaxation, and the imitative sycophancy of mass taste. Written for the largely non-conformist readership of the *Monthly Magazine*, Wollstonecraft's commendation of the natural world in "On Poetry" is one of an active engagement that demands effort. There is an identity of form and content in the essay which, setting out from a regret that the taste for nature popular with her contemporaries is not grounded in "real perception", takes a discursive explanation of different tastes before circuitously returning to its point of departure and to closure with an insistence that "the understanding must bring back feelings to nature". It is fitting then that, as Wollstonecraft's last published essay, "On Poetry" itself perhaps amounts to an unintended coda to the rest of her work.

The foregoing examples demonstrate Romantic women writers' use of personal literature to negotiate natural spaces in extremely adverse circumstances. Wollstonecraft's writings invoke the author's desire to assert a rationalist feminist perspective, a sense that partly counterpoints the sensibility of Williams's chronicles of life in revolutionary France. Yet while Wollstonecraft avoids Williams's romance frame, the main prototypes for a *Short Residence* are Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768) and Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, both associated with sensibility. As Vivien Jones comments, the epistolary form enabled a narrative voice that combined the personal and the political (Jones 1993: 302). In such prose, extraordinary first hand experiences of imprisonment and depression are mediated through and further develop prevailing fictional tastes for sensibility, the gothic and the picturesque. They are also derived from and some cases anticipate masculine texts, frequently contesting discursive categories of nature and culture.

In the literature of Helen Maria Williams and Charlotte Smith in particular, the presence of natural history was to signify more than mere background colour. Botany and natural history were key to the project for enlightened education that Williams admired in the Parisian Lycée in *Letters from France* (H. W. Williams [1795–96] 1975: I.ii.30). Deborah Kennedy notes that later Williams's translation of Alexander von Humboldt's *Personal Narrative* (1814–29) was to inspire Charles Darwin to take up science and travel (Kennedy 2002: 186). Charlotte Smith undertook extensive work in popularising natural history and was a talented botanical illustrator. Wollstonecraft privileged the importance of the countryside by developing a theory of the literary use of natural

imagery in “On Poetry”. The sensibility demonstrated in earlier works such as *Mary* gives way to a more sceptical attitude, but there remains a belief in the value of authentic engagement with nature and doubts about the direction of progress in purely quantitative terms that marks the Romantic disquiet with the civilising project in “On Poetry” and *A Short Residence*. The critical engagement with the rural ideal in Wollstonecraft’s final works retains a belief in the natural environment’s value for human well-being. For the four women under discussion the “vivid green” of the countryside symbolically allows the imagination to slip the bars and walls of what Mary Robinson calls “the dark galleries of a prison” (Robinson [1801] 1930: 99), an actual captivity she suffered in common with Williams and Smith and the figurative restriction of extreme depression suffered by Wollstonecraft. For all of them attention to the natural environment not only supported physical health but buttressed mental resilience and was vital to the literary imagination.

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