

THE AESTHETIC POLITICS OF LANDSCAPE

**THE AESTHETIC POLITICS OF LANDSCAPE
IN THE POETRY OF CHARLOTTE SMITH**

By

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

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**MASTER OF ARTS (1992)
(English)**

**McMASTER UNIVERSITY
Hamilton, Ontario**

TITLE: The Aesthetic Politics of Landscape in the Poetry of Charlotte Smith

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NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 77

ABSTRACT

This thesis undertakes a close analysis of the aesthetic politics of landscape in Charlotte Smith's two most extensive poetic works, *The Emigrants* and *Beachy Head*, both of which describe fully evoked and complex cosmologies. It uses current feminist and Marxist critiques of the gendered eighteenth-century aesthetic categories of the "sublime" and the "beautiful," as well as discussions of the "picturesque," to reveal the strategies that Charlotte Smith employs in order to write through discourses which act to marginalize her. As a study of an historically specific set of discourses the approach is indebted as well to the feminist deployment of Foucauldian discourse analysis outlined by Chris Weedon in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*.

The methodology for this study involves a close, chronological reading of the poetry. This is a necessary first step toward understanding and appreciating the work of a woman poet almost entirely neglected since her time. It is a beginning contribution as well toward uncovering or recovering a female "romantic" voice. Since the focus at this stage must be on the work of the

woman poet herself, and since the scope of this thesis is limited, there is no attempt to make full-scale comparisons with male Romantic poets.

This study reveals a complex and creative response to the imposition of an unjustly weighted aesthetic ideology. Smith's revisionary treatment challenges the validity of gendering and hierarchizing aesthetic modes of perception. At the same time, her work offers a powerful portrayal of the painfully fragmented sensibility which necessarily results from the imposition of such a system.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Donald Goellnicht for his supportive and discerning supervision during the preparation of this thesis.

My sincere thanks go as well to Dr. Sylvia Bowerbank for her support and guidance and for a most inspiring introduction both to the topic of nature and culture and to the women writers of the eighteenth century.

This thesis would not have been possible without the kind support for my work of Dr. Jean Wilson. As well, her stimulating introduction to Romanticism generated many of the questions that led to the formulation of this project.

I would like to thank Judith Pascoe for allowing me to read her very interesting and valuable paper, "Female Botanists and Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head*."

Finally I would like to thank Mrs. Sarah Fick for her kind and invaluable assistance in the processing of this document.

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Introduction

This study of the aesthetic politics of landscape in Charlotte Smith's poetry owes its impetus to the recent work of recovery and feminist evaluation of women's writing of the late eighteenth century, as well as to the current feminist critique of the gendered aesthetics of the eighteenth century and Romantic periods. These aesthetics are invested primarily in the hierarchized opposition between the masculine "sublime" and the feminine "beautiful," which, along with a third category, the "picturesque," will provide the main terms of my analysis. I will turn to a discussion of these terms later in this introduction. Such aesthetic schematizing continues to affect our ideas about women's potential range of expression and to de-value the ways in which women *have* managed to express themselves, both within and without given formulations, preventing our full reception of the significance and complexity of women's work.

In the late eighteenth century, as now, this discussion participates in the larger "debate" about what constitutes "human" and "female" nature. Women at the close of the eighteenth century experienced a particularly heightened set of contradictions between, on the one hand, the realms of ideological debate about their nature and their rights, and on the other, actual

social practice (Poovey, 30). At the same time that the French revolution was inspiring “radical investigations of the ‘perfectibility’ of human nature” and “numerous ‘rational’ discussions of women’s nature and position,” the rise of the male commercial and professional middle-class was divesting middle-class women of their traditional social roles in the home and the community, and confining them within an ideology of passive and “moral” femininity (Poovey, 31). Vivien Jones suggests that: “In a developing consumer economy to have, or to become a ‘leisured’ wife was a measure of social success, underwriting the dependence of that economy on the isolated unit of the nuclear family, serviced by an invisible working class” (10). Women were increasingly invested with qualities - softness, sympathy, beauty - that men involved in competitive commercial activity could not afford, apart from during their private, “off” hours. Nonetheless, the displaced “sensibility,” with its “emphasis on morality and feeling,” at least at the level of ideology was formative of the rising middle-class’ sense of its identity, and even involved a “general ‘feminization’ of culture” (Jones, 11).

The “cult of sensibility” opened a space for the valorization of women’s expression and, as has recently been re-discovered, there were more women writing in England in the last decades of the eighteenth century than had ever been the case. However, as Poovey, Todd, Jones and many others have pointed out, the “enabling effects” of the discourse of sensibility were

limited by “surrounding discourses” which relegated women’s sphere of experience and expression to the domestic and private and subordinated women’s sensibility to the superior capacity of male “sublimity” (Jones, 11).

Within the realm of aesthetics, female “nature” was aligned with “the beautiful,” most notoriously defined by Edmund Burke who associated this category with smallness, delicacy, softness, sweetness and smoothness, as well as with the social virtues of “easiness of temper, compassion, kindness liberality” (Burke, 102-113, 100). Burke described the “sublime” as a masculine mode, a manifestation of power, which “comes upon us in the gloomy forest, and in the howling wilderness” and provokes awe, terror and submission (59-65). It is associated with the divine, and on a lesser level, with “the authority of a father” (64, 101). It involves the mind as well as the emotions, “the mind always claiming to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates” (46). The “sublime” is a superior value to the “beautiful” because it is masterful, while “love,” associated with the “beautiful,” “approaches much nearer to contempt than is commonly imagined” (61). There were varying definitions of these aesthetic terms, and in practice they were profoundly unstable.¹ Upon examination in fact, it is clear that it is impossible to maintain the integrity of the opposition

¹ See Martin Price’s article, “The Sublime Poem,” for a discussion of the various ways in which the sublime was employed in eighteenth century poetics.

between the “sublime” and the “beautiful,” and I will look further at the terms and at recent criticism in the latter part of this introduction.

A close reading of Charlotte Smith’s poetry reveals a complex response to the imposition of this gendered, hierarchized aesthetic. While she cannot avoid the given formulations and conventions, her work challenges, sometimes explicitly, often implicitly, the de-valuation of those qualities assigned to women, as well as the restriction which makes “masculine” modes unavailable to women; throughout, it expresses the painful reality of the fragmented and disenfranchized sensibility which necessarily results from this “division of experience.” Stuart Curran, in his discussion of Smith’s poetry has noted what emerges as the portrayal of “a disembodied sensibility at the mercy of an alien universe and without discernible exit from its condition” (“Romantic Poetry,” 200). He sees this “portrayal of alienated sensibility” as a prominent feature of women’s poetry in the period (203).

This thesis, then, will involve a close analysis of the aesthetic politics of Smith’s landscape in her two most extensive poetic works, *The Emigrants* and *Beachy Head*, both of which explore fully evoked and complex cosmologies. What it will not undertake is an attempt to make full-scale comparisons with or define a relationship to the “nature” poetry or the aesthetics of the male Romantics. Since work on the newly recovered women poets of the 1790s has barely begun, the project here is to lay some

groundwork for further analysis by doing the necessary work of a close, chronological reading of the poetry, in terms that provide a starting point for the comparisons and contextualization that must follow. I draw on a number of feminist and Marxist theorists since I see issues of gender and class as necessarily interrelated and because I am interested in the effects on the expression of subjectivity of discourses that are both gendered and class-bound. As a study of an historically specific set of discourses, my approach is indebted to the delineation of a feminist deployment of Foucauldian discourse analysis put forward by Chris Weedon in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Since I am studying one poet's response to the aesthetics of her time, I do not attempt or aspire to conclusive formulations about women's poetics in the 1790s, or women's poetics in general. Chris Weedon suggests that:

the danger in formulating general laws about women's writing is that they render difference and contradictions invisible, differences which are at least as important as similarities and which tell us more about the precise discursive structuring of gender at any particular historical moment (157).

My intent, then, is to explore Smith's particular response to the aesthetic "structuring of gender" of her time, taking into account her subject position as a woman poet and a disinherited member of the upper class, as well as other factors such as her interest in botany and natural science and her liberal politics. While I do not primarily intend a biographical reading, some particulars

of Smith's biography will be relevant to her poetics, and relevant also in the context of the emerging predominance of a poetics of the personal. In fact the poet's very problematic attempt at self-representation through a gendered and hierarchized aesthetic which acts to exclude and/or confine her is very much to the point of this study.

Terry Eagleton has suggested that the increasing preoccupation with philosophical aesthetics in the eighteenth century reflected a shift in the experienced locus of political authority from external to internal, from the absolute power asserted from outside by the state to the ostensibly freely chosen actions of the individual, emerging from his own "psychology" or his "taste" (Eagleton, 19). This shift itself was the result of the rise of the middle-class, with its requirement for both individual initiative and autonomy and an ideology that could mask the disharmony and inequality of marketplace relations: "the 'aesthetic' realm of sentiments, affections and spontaneous bodily habits comes to assume [new] significance...Custom, piety, intuition and opinion must now cohere an otherwise abstract, atomized social order" (Eagleton, 23). While acknowledging "the internal complexity of the aesthetic," we may still note in broad terms the rather neat correspondence of the discourse of the sublime and the beautiful to the double ideological requirements of the middle-class: the "sublime" responds to the need for individual masculine empowerment, while the "beautiful" isolates the ideal of

social harmony and proportion and invests it primarily in an inactive feminine sub-class (Eagleton, 4).

These categories are clearly political rather than “natural” and as such are open to varying interpretations and deployments. In poetic practice the “sublime” could be suggested by any manifestation of the power of nature. However, the “embodiment” of that power, while necessary to its apprehension and communication, is problematic and even paradoxical. Kant’s sublime, as Theresa Kelley points out, “owes its existence to the mind...but not to nature”:

The mind discovers the sublime as the imagination attempts to encompass nature’s magnitude (the ‘mathematically sublime’) or to resist its might (the ‘dynamically sublime’). The imagination fails, but reason recognizes in this failure a power of ‘faculty of judgment’ which surpasses nature and sense experience. (132)

Ironically, the translation of “sublime” experience depends upon “the task of providing images,” or the realm of the beautiful, “the aesthetic of proportion and limit” (Kelley, 137, 136). Further, the experience of the sublime is artificially contained and constructed. Burke states that “When danger or pain press too nearly, they...are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful” (36-7).

Frances Ferguson, in her article “The Sublime of Edmund Burke,” notes the irony of such “distance”:

The sublime...dwindles as soon as familiarity converts the necessary distance of danger and death into an absolute banishment of those dreads. And the very

fashionableness of the notion of the sublime represents a self-destructive combination. To speak of an habitual or fashionable sublime, though such a thing certainly finds ample documentation in late eighteenth-century and Romantic texts, is to suggest a logical difficulty.... (71)

Familiarity brings the sublime within the realm of custom, associated with the “social” category of the beautiful (Burke, 39). Ironically, as Ferguson demonstrates, Burke’s rhetoric places the real “danger” to “self-preservation” in the actual (as opposed to the abstract or the ideal) pleasures of the beautiful, which “form...a seductive and indirect assault on the reason” (75). In Burke’s terms the presence of the beautiful is enervating, producing “an inward sense of melting and languor” (135). This “languid inactive state” produces physical and mental “disorders,” including a loss of “the vigorous tone of fibre” in the body, and “Melancholy, dejection [and] despair” (122). The “remedy” for these conditions is the “exertion” of the physical and, perhaps most importantly, the mental powers, the mode of the sublime, here associated with “labour”:

Labour is not only requisite to preserve the coarser organs in a state fit for their functions, but it is equally necessary to these finer and more delicate organs, on which, and by which, the imagination, and perhaps the other mental powers act. (122)

Eagleton suggests that the sublime “is the rich man’s labour, invigorating an otherwise dangerously complacent ruling class. If that class cannot know the uncertain pleasures of loading a ship, it can gaze instead at one tossed on the

turbulent ocean” (56-7). Conversely, labour, along with religion, is the “poor person’s” sublime (56). There are striking echoes of Burke’s mistrust of the pleasures of the beautiful in Barbara Ehrenreich’s characterization of the *contemporary* middle class, who exhibit, she says, “a fear of inner weakness, of growing soft, of failing to strive, of losing discipline and will” (15).

If the “sublime” slips into the “beautiful” as it acquires actual form and presence, and hence familiarity, it is again ironic to note the tension between the ideal of beauty and its actuality, if in fact the latter is admitted. Frances Hutcheson’s early influential treatise, “An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue” (1725), states that “beauty is taken for the idea raised in us,” and the “idea” is “uniformity amidst variety” (Section I, Article IX, Section II, Article III). This is a formal, “absolute” or “original” beauty, superior to the “relative” or “comparative kind” (Section I, Article XVI). Similarly, Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out that Kant’s criteria for the judgment of beauty in his “Analytic of the Beautiful” requires “a pure reflection on the pure sensation of the pure operation of the mental faculties responding to pure form” (68). Such formulations remove the exalted, mental and hence masculine perception of beauty from the sphere of women, who are deemed incapable of thinking abstractly (Barrell, 66). Women, then, even within “their” realm, the “beautiful,” are left with the “relative,” the “particular,” the

“contaminated” and the “contingent,” in fact with the “real,” for as Hernstein

Smith asserts in her deconstruction of Kant’s argument:

that which...we still, informally, call “sensation” and/or “perception” is now understood as the always complexly contingent product of a global interaction in which the subject selects and configures elements of *her* environment in relation to the current state of her own system as that system has been produced by her own quite individual history. (68-9, emphasis mine)

Charlotte Smith’s work, I would suggest, manifests just such a sense of contingency and particularity. While she invokes ostensibly absolute or ideal values, because as a woman she cannot speak with any authority outside of a limited feminine discourse, and because her own experience belies them, she cannot sustain her investment in the integrity of the values she invokes. In her response to her landscape, she moves restlessly among discourses, constructing, for example, a pastoral idyll and then immediately deflating it, invoking the pleasures and compensations of beautiful nature but depicting them as in the past or as tentative and threatened. She often mingles and confuses “sublime” and “beautiful” values. Her marginalization, her lack of access to “sublime” power, allows her, perhaps forces her, to see the implications of unrestrained power, of an actualized sublime, while still depicting the pain of disenfranchisement. Her response to the relegation of her sex to the beautiful and the particular is to give new meaning and a sense of reality, of

lived experience, to these values, while revealing them as isolated and besieged.

Smith makes use, especially in *Beachy Head*, of a third category, the “picturesque.” As a painterly mode, the picturesque emerged in the late eighteenth century as a reconciliation between the sublime and the beautiful, adding the interest of detail, variety and roughness to the smoothness and proportion of the beautiful, and softening the harshness of the sublime (Bermingham, 63). Smith as a girl liked to sketch, and studied landscape art. In his study of the picturesque, Christopher Hussey suggests that Smith’s novels reveal “a careful reading of Gilpin,” who was the first theorist of the picturesque (232). Gilpin “reoriented the formal objective of landscape painting away from creating ideal beauty to depicting the ‘real landscape.’ This orientation stressed...the processes of observing and recording” (Bermingham, 65). There is a similar movement in the poetics of nature in the late eighteenth century, to “prolonged, rapt, exceptional [natural] description: an intricate working of particularity” that is concurrent with a new scientific zeal for “watching and describing nature” (Williams, 133). This new interest in “unaltered nature...known at the time as ‘picturesque,’ was, according to Raymond Williams, “a by-product...of a century of reclamation, drainage and clearing,” or the *altering* of nature (128). As well, there is a new poetic language of nature that participates in the internalization of aesthetic values

outlined by Terry Eagleton. Williams describes the new language as, “the investment of nature with a quality of creation that is now, in its new form, internal; so that the more closely the object is described, the more directly, in a newly working language and rhythm, a feeling of the observer’s life is seen and known” (133). He associates this new, psychologized poetic of nature with the alienation that resulted from the commodification of rural land and the dispossession of its inhabitants, through enclosures and clearances.

Although the “picturesque” involved a turn to the “natural” and a more “realistic” landscape, it also functioned as an idealization of “a nature that was in fact rapidly vanishing” (Bermingham, 68). Further, it aestheticized the effects of the agrarian revolution, rendering as “picturesque” the rural poor and dispossessed, the “gypsies, beggars [and] foresters,” as well as the abandoned landscape:

Coming at the height of the agricultural transformation of the countryside, the picturesque was suited to express the complexity of the historical moment. In its celebration of the irregular, preenclosed landscape, the picturesque harkened back nostalgically to the old order of rural paternalism. In its portrayal of dilapidation and ruin, the picturesque sentimentalized the loss of this old order. And in its emphasis on the erosions of time, it not only doomed the old order but also obliquely recognized the precariously temporal nature of the new order that replaced it (Bermingham, 69-70).

As my analysis of *The Emigrants* and *Beachy Head* will show, Smith makes clear use of the “picturesque” mode, both in her detailed, natural

descriptions and through idealized, nostalgic portraits of rural inhabitants and scenes. She is, however, inconsistent, sometimes juxtaposing starkly realistic portrayals alongside the idealizations, revealing a consciousness that cannot allow itself to take permanent refuge in mystifications. Ultimately, Smith seeks her sense of authority in Rousseauian “natural” values, from which she asserts, to her own purposes, the “natural” human right to liberty and the “unnatural” corruption and tyranny of social institutions of power. However, the pervasive sense of despair, and the dark, constant presence of submerged, elemental, unrealized life, threatens to overwhelm all finer distinctions of “nature” in Smith’s poetry.

The Emigrants

The Emigrants, a blank verse poem in two books, was written in 1792 and 1793, and describes the speaker's meditation on a group of exiles from the Terror produced in the aftermath of the French revolution, as she encounters them while wandering on the Sussex shoreline. The poem is dedicated to William Cowper and Smith cites his poem, *The Task*, and particularly book five, as her inspiration, while stating with the required feminine humility that she would not presume to call her poem an "imitation" of his, for "it belongs not to a feeble and feminine hand to draw the Bow of Ulysses" (v). The statement that follows exceeds formal, feminine convention in its suggestion: "The force, clearness, and sublimity of your admirable Poem; the felicity, almost peculiar to your genius, of giving to the most familiar objects dignity and effect, I could never hope to reach" (v, vi). Smith defers here to the masculine, "sublime" mode which, ironically, she sees manifested in Cowper's poem as an elevation of the feminine realm of the "familiar," a claim that Wordsworth later makes for the sublime in his poetry. She is not only barred, then, from a full range of poetic expression, but well aware of the devaluation of what is left to her. Her voice can "never hope" to lend, to the familiar or the unfamiliar, the "dignity and effect" that a male voice can, simply by virtue of

gender (v). In fact while *The Emigrants* deals with many of the themes found in Cowper's poem - tyranny, corruption and liberty - Smith's tone is one of desperate protest; her voice never finds the authority that even Cowper, with his own sense of debility, is able to assume. Ironically, however, the insistent "stream" of life that runs through Cowper's treatment of man's brutality becomes in *The Emigrants* an oceanic presence, a "wound'rous World of Waters," brooding, restless and changeable, "embodying" the sublimated presence of suppressed life, existing in "troubled" juxtaposition with a harsh, unyielding and often "sublime" landscape which is overshadowed by war (Priestman, 125, Smith, 2,1). Within this elemental context the female speaker's private despair connects with the alienated figures of the exiles:

Their compounded loss of language, country and means threatens their very sense of cultural and personal identity, and as the poem increasingly focuses on them as emblems of alienated humanity, the greater becomes their correspondence to the solitary figure observing them. (Curran, 201)

The figures of the French exiles provide the poet with recognizable "emblems" of political and social "alienation," to which she resorts because her own alienation is *not* recognizable and has no "means" of articulation outside of the limited and relatively de-valued discourse of "sensitivity." The poet's own predicament would not have been seen as political and so,

relegated to the sphere of the “domestic” and the “feminine,” it emerges as “complaint.”

Some biography is relevant by way of explanation. Smith was born into the landed gentry. Her mother died when she was just three, and at the age of fifteen she was given by her father in marriage to a man who mishandled his money and was constantly in debt. After she separated from Benjamin Smith in 1797, Smith supported the eight children who were with her (she bore twelve children), and three grandchildren, through novel writing, even though she considered herself primarily a poet. She tried unsuccessfully to gain legal access to a fund set up by her deceased father-in-law for her children, and even the money she made from her writing legally belonged to her husband (Todd, 287-9). Smith had to work constantly in order to survive; William Cowper observed that she was “chained to her desk like a slave to *his* oar” (quoted in Lonsdale, 366, emphasis mine). In 1793, the year that *The Emigrants* was published, Smith was “quite destitute...crippled [by illness] much of the time, her son Charles lost his leg in battle, and her vexations regarding the Smith estate redoubled” (Turner, 120). Smith was interested in more, however, than simply finding a vehicle to express her own unhappiness. She had strongly supported the ideals of the French revolution and continued to advocate the ideal even when disillusioned with the practice. She was the first English novelist to bring the debate about the revolution into her work but

ironically, of course, had no political franchise herself (Doody, 178). While Smith could identify with the status of the French exiles as disinherited nobility, then, her response to them is more complex and, I believe, has more to do with the reality of her own economic, political and cultural disenfranchisement.

The existential tone of the poem is established with a harsh immediacy in the opening description of a bleak, utterly unyielding winter seascape:

Slow in the Wintry Morn, the struggling light
 Throws a faint gleam upon the troubled waves;
 Their foaming tops, as they approach the shore
 And the broad surf that never ceasing breaks
 On the innumerable pebbles, catch the beams
 Of the pale Sun, that with reluctance gives
 To this cold northern isle, its shorten'd day. (1) ¹

The scene is numbing, and yet the “struggling light,” the “troubled waves” and the breaking surf suggest a restless, disturbed presence (1). The image of water meeting the rocky shoreline recurs throughout the poem. Here, there is a sense of utter futility in “the broad surf that never ceasing breaks / On the innumerable pebbles,” for while the broken rocks suggest an effect from the unrelenting water, their very numerousness seems to cancel out that effect (1).

Even the ineffectual light of the “Wintry Morn” reveals more than is welcome to a consciousness that desires “oblivious night” (1). Night and sea,

¹ I will refer, throughout, to page, rather than line numbers, in the poem.

both traditionally feminine images, together suggest a presence that could potentially engulf the world that daylight reveals, with “*his* beams” (2). The dark night and the anonymous sea form an inarticulate, negative presence but yet contain almost palpably subversive currents, in night’s “black Wings” and the sea’s “foaming” and “never ceasing” movement (2, 1). There is a kind of anti-Genesis present here, in the evocation of a cold dawn over an elemental world, almost grotesquely “a Morning in November, 1792, ... on the Cliffs to the Eastward of the Town of Brighthelmstone in Sussex” (6). In fact the poem proceeds to invoke the God of Genesis, “He, whose Spirit into being call’d / This wond’rous World of Waters” (2). This is a sublimely fearful, forbidding and powerful God:

. . . He who bids
 The wild wind lift [the waters] till they dash the clouds,
 And speaks to them in thunder; or whose breath,
 Low murmuring o’er the gently heaving tides,
 When the fair Moon, in summer night serene,
 Irradiates with long trembling lines of light
 Their undulating surface (2)

The masculine, sublime God asserts his control over a feminized world of night and sea alternately through violence and an almost sensual subdual, “Low murmuring o’er the gently heaving tides” (2). There is an disrupted sense of the feminine “beautiful” light of the “fair Moon” in its reflection on the disturbed movement of the water, with “long trembling lines of light” (2). God’s “murmuring” over the waves picks up the “murmur” of human complaint on

page one and begins a chorus that repeats throughout the poem. Although God is invoked, formally, as “surely” intending “Nothing but good” for his “creatures,” he remains distant and forbidding. He “knows,” as he knows the movements of the planets, when “a Sea-Mew falls ” from its nest in the rough “incumbent” cliffs,” but there is no suggestion that He is moved (3). His “awful hand” (even in the sense of awe inspiring), which “He bids [us]...Acknowledge and revere,” contrasts with the maternal, engendering and nourishing “humid hand” of “Spring” which appears later in the poem (2, 40).

While perhaps not comforted by Heaven, the speaker cannot place the source of the world’s pain there, and she moves to consider “misguided Man”. The poet’s own experience in attempting to gain legal access to her children’s inheritance emerges here, in the reference to “legal crimes” (3). She clearly recognizes the legal system as a prime instrument of patriarchal and class privilege which blocks her, as a woman, from her rights, and withholds justice from the poor: “in this Land...the vain boast / Of equal Law is mockery; while the cost / Of seeking for redress is sure to plunge / Th’already injured to more certain ruin” (3). The image of the “injur’d” who is “plunge[d]...to...ruin,” draws an implicit parallel with the fallen “Sea-Mew” (3). Still, she displaces her own subjectivity: “the wretch starves, before *his* Counsel pleads” (3).

The passage that follows evokes a compensatory, natural scene, in language that prefigures Wordsworth:

How often do I half abjure Society,
 And sigh for some lone Cottage, deep embower'd
 In the green woods, that these steep chalky Hills
 Guard from the strong South West; where round their
 base
 The Beach wide flourishes, and the light Ash
 With slender leaf half hides the thymy turf! --
 There do I wish to hide me (4)

The “quick evocation of natural detail” is characteristic of Smith, and of course comes to be known as a Wordsworthian quality (Curran, 202). Unlike Wordsworth, however, the speaker here is unable to sustain any sense of compensation in nature, and the type of compensation she desires is also different. The speaker here wishes to be “shelter’d” and hidden, “embower’d” in the embrace of a “beautiful” nature which is sustained by a powerful nature that protects rather than threatens life, “Guard[ed],” by the “steep chalky Hills...from the strong South West” (4). And then, under the softened light of Eve[ning], the speaker imagines that she might venture forth to “Gain the high mound” that affords a sublimely expansive view, here figured as beneficent and beautiful rather than terrible (4). From a safe distance, she can countenance the female body of the “waves remote,” touched with a mere “blush” from the “rays / Of the far-flaming Orb, that sinks beneath them” (4). With the power of the sun declining, the speaker imagines a world “unspoil’d by Man,” and herself potentially “less affected then, by human woes”(4). The scene evokes a religious sublime in which the speaker feels a sense of freedom from pain in

her contemplation of “The beauteous works of God” (4). The feminized God that presides over this *imagined* scene is very different than the God who is first invoked in the poem.

The expansive, hopeful moment is fleeting and quickly collapses into a longing for “Peace” which recalls the wish for “oblivious night,” here figured as a sleep which approaches death: “Tranquil seclusion I have vainly sought; / Peace, who delights in solitary shade, / No more will spread for me her downy wings” (1,5). The desire for “Peace” connects the speaker’s private need with the broader theme of the poem which evokes a world in conflict. We are back in the harsh, elemental and even hellish landscape which is the speaker’s reality. There is no feminine softness and no refuge in this world. She compares herself to Sisyphus, “the wretch, / Who ceaseless, up the steep activity, / Was doom’d to heave the still rebounding rock,” or the “baffled wave, / Which yon rough beach repulses, that returns / With the next breath of wind, to fail again” (5). Her burden is her never ceasing “labour” against unyielding, “still rebounding rock” and her apparently futile existence as “the baffled wave” (5).

A religious and melancholy sublime is then suggested in the image of the “Mourner...wailing” in a wilderness of hopelessness, in which all of man’s constructs prove meaningless and ineffectual. The speaker’s most favoured image, “the Cot sequester’d, where the briar / And wood-bine wild,

embrace the mossy thatch," sheltered "amid the forest gloom obscure," cannot provide escape, nor can the "rustic" ideal, the "substantial farm, well fenced and warm," with "cattle fodder'd round" and a "full barn" (6). Even the "statlier dome," the great church, cannot shut out "the spectre Care" (6). And yet the manorial "Lord" can deploy his wealth to create a picturesque "smiling prospect" which hides, "By verdant foliage...the poor man's grave" so that it does not "mar" his view (6). Such social and aesthetic strategies are not available to the speaker, or to the poet. As poetic modes these constructs have not historically belonged to her, nor does she figure within these tableaux. The speaker's own reality is as hidden as the poor man's grave, and she understands the injustice at work here. In fact, these constructs, "the buildings, new and trim / With windows circling towards the restless Sea" circumscribe the speaker's life, "ranged in rows, now terminate my walk," just as they attempt, perhaps ambiguously, to encircle the turmoil of the "restless Sea" (6). Since the speaker is excluded from all else, the "sole secure asylum" is in death (7).

"In witness" of the speaker's own "mournful truth," the French exiles appear, "Men / Banish'd for ever...and much abus'd / By lawless Anarchy...driven...To wander...Thro' the wide World unshelter'd" (7). They, like the speaker, are figured against the harsh, sublime landscape, "the barrier of the rock" (8). The speaker proceeds to describe each individual: the monk,

the prelate, the abbe, the poor priest and the exiled noblewoman with her family. While she sees “in each expressive face...Discriminated anguish,” she herself discriminates between her sympathy for their plight and her disdain for the religion and politics of the exiles. Her disapproval of Catholicism and of the ideology of the nobility is characterized as an underlying belief in “natural” virtue. The abbé, accustomed to splendour, ministers to poor “kneeling crowds,” holding them in thrall with “the imaginary bones / Of Saints suppos’d in pearl and gold enchas’d,” and the nobleman thinks that his blood “Exalts him o’er the race of common men” (17, 24).² The speaker feels more sympathy for the parochial priest whom she envisions as the picturesque “simple shepherd in a rustic scene...’mid the vine-clad hills of Languedoc” (19-20). The priest, and the peasants to whom he ministers, are sentimentalized; on the one hand, for their “submission,” and, on the other, for their “indignant hearts” (20). The priest,

Taught to the bare foot peasant, whose hard hands
 Produc’d the nectar he could seldom taste,
 Submission to the Lord for whom he toil’d;
 He, or his brethren...
 Enforc’d religious patience, when, at times,
 On their indignant hearts Power’s iron hand
 Too strongly struck; eliciting some sparks
 Of the bold spirit of their native North (20)

² Due to a compositor’s error in the 1793 edition, the pagination moves from eight to seventeen.

Clearly, while the oppression of the peasants is sentimentalized, there is a sense of identification with the ideological passion and the anger evoked in response to the too heavy “iron hand” of “Power” (20). The imagery, “sparks / Of the bold spirit of their native North,” is sublime (20). Similarly, while the speaker is careful to draw a line between “Liberty” and “licence,” there is a passionate and ideological sublimity in the image of the “madd’ning flock, / Who, at the novel sound of Liberty / (Ah! most intoxicating sound to slaves!), / Start into licence” (21). Sentiment, political commitment and sublimity converge here. Julie Ellison, in her study of Mary Wollstonecraft and Helen Maria Williams, has observed that:

in political rhetoric a writer - and perhaps with particular overtness a woman writer - will typically become very sublime, very sentimental, and very ideologically committed all at once...the sublime is taken out of the oppositional purity in which Burke tried to place it and is made contiguous to and sometimes indistinguishable from sentiment. (199)

The speaker, as a member of a group, a “class,” whose oppression, however painful its reality, is not “recognizable,” identifies with the disinherited from the peasantry *and* the nobility. Her consciousness of her own oppression is unstable, sometimes identified with other social groups, and often sublimated, expressed as the primal, feminine element in the landscape. Her sense of identity with the French exiles connects, in a general way, through that element, the sea, which seems to embody their mutual pain:

I mourn your sorrows; for I too have known
 Involuntary exile; and while yet
 England had charms for me, have felt how sad
 It is to look across the dim cold sea,
 That melancholy rolls its refluent tides
 Between us and the dear regretted land
 We call our own - as now ye pensive wait
 On this bleak morning, gazing on the waves
 That seem to leave your shore (19)

The speaker's sense of identification is perhaps more immediate with the figure of the dispossessed "Mother" who is left with nothing but the consciousness of her existential condition. She sits, surrounded by her children, in a space where the elements meet and there is little comfort, "Where the cliff, hollow'd by the wintry storm, / Affords a seat with matted sea-weed strewn...Lull'd for a moment by the murmurs low / Of sullen billows, wearied by the task / Of [watching] with swol'n and aching eyes...the grey horizon" (22). The image of watching an empty horizon recurs, suggesting futility, and the expectation, perhaps the hope, of death. Memories of the woman's former riches prove to be as illusory and false as the "painted galleries," and "long mirrors" of Versailles, which "multiply'd, the crowd[s] / ...willing homage" (23). There, an artificial "Beauty," gilded and splendid, performed the insidious function of giving "charms to empire" (23). And even a noblewoman can become disinherited, and forced to confront her "drear reality - where dark'ning waves, / Urg'd by the rising wind, unheeded foam / Near her cold rugged seat" (23).

Here again are the ever-present “troubled waves,” murmuring, “dark’ning,” foaming, suggesting a restless, suppressed consciousness, “unheeded” (23).

The nobleman, like his female counterpart, was fed on illusions and false values, “Nurs’d in the velvet lap of luxury, / And fed by adulation” (24). The “splendid trophies / Of Heraldry” that mark his patriarchal and class lineage, his “boasted ancestry,” are illusory and grotesque, “like images in feverish dreams, / ‘Gorgons and Hydras, and Chimeras dire,’ / With painted puns, and visionary shapes” (25). Equally distorted are the tastes of those in the “populous City,” for “splendid shows, / The Theatre, and pageant pomp of Courts” (25). The speaker asserts in contrast the values of “Nature’s genuine beauty,” evoking a refreshing animation missing from the wider landscape of the poem: “gushing waters...sighing winds...birds rejoicing in the tangled copse” (25-6). In this alternative, “beautiful” landscape the elements, ocean and sky, serenely reflect on each other, and the water is calm and subdued, meeting peacefully with a soft shoreline: “the summer clouds / [are] reflected in the wave, that, hardly heard, / Flows on the yellow sand” (26). But those who cannot appreciate natural values and natural virtue have made the world a wilderness for the “plunder’d myriads” whom they exploit, “by the means / Too often legaliz’d by power abus’d” (27). Again there is a critique of corruption, the misuse of institutionalized power which hides behind “worldly grandeur” so that “abject Slavery seems...slavery no more: / For luxury wreathes with silk

the iron bonds, / And hides the ugly rivets with her flowers" (26). Worldly power distorts the value of the beautiful. Burke's suggestion of the potentially insidious use of that value is cast here as *mis-use*.

The noble exiles from France, stripped of their privilege, are juxtaposed with England's dispossessed rural poor, "outcasts of the world! / Whom no abode receives, no parish owns" (28). The speaker asserts the harsh reality of such disinheritance, refusing (at least here) to put the beautiful to false use by dressing the poor "solitary Sheperd" in pastoral convention (28). Instead, he "shiv'ring tends / His dun discolour'd flock...unlike / Him, whom in Song the Poet's fancy crowns / With garlands, and his crook with vi'lets binds" (28). Yet "The strange vicisitudes of fate" are such that "The exil'd Nobles, from their country driven...must feel / More poignant anguish, than the lowest poor...born to indigence" (28). The speaker, as a woman, and particularly an upper class woman, identifies here more strongly with the experience of the *loss* of status than with being born into poverty.

The speaker's sense of outrage and corresponding pity seem restless and sometimes ambiguous, yet they are unrelenting, despite the tone of weariness that also pervades the poem. She focuses now, energetically, on "Fortune's worthless favourites," the "Pensioners," and "pamper'd Parasites" who cheat the people, "feed[ing] on England's vitals" (29). Here she evokes a furiously sublime force, citing the "lesson" of the French revolution: "if

oppress'd too long, / The raging multitude, to madness stung, / Will turn on their oppressors...then swept away by the resistless torrent...all your pomp may disappear" (30). The imagery of the "raging...resistless torrent" which sweeps away all in its path, recalls the "World of Waters" at the opening of the poem, only here the (implied) water moves, powerfully, on its own impetus. The speaker's retreat from "lawless Anarchy" reflects her class interests, but the feminine imagery through which it is figured also suggests an unconscious fear of her own suppressed energies: in "English hearts," a feminine "compassion" must "ever own the sway, / As truly as our element, the deep, / Obeys the mild dominion of the Moon" (31-2).

Book II opens under the gentle auspices of the "Moon that now / Lights her pale crescent even at noon" and with the potentially fairer prospects of a springtime afternoon. This suggests a contrast with the opening of Book I, with its masculine, desolate world. But the feminine is not strong enough to hold sway. While the feminine Moon "has made / Four times her revolution," her movements have been as ineffectual as the "Mournful and slow" steps of the speaker, "along the wave-worn cliff," because she moves in a masculine world "Where Desolation riots" (39-40). The speaker, like the exiles, has nowhere to walk in this world; she "Shrink[s] from the future, and regret[s] the past" (40). Still, she would "snatch an interval from Care" and attempt to inhale the bouyant, "fragrant airs" of the coming of Spring to "this Upland

scene" (40). Again, a sense of expansiveness is aligned with beauty. And the figure of Spring is invoked with an intimacy that identifies with her maternal tenderness:

. . . here I mark Spring's humid hand unfold
 The early leaves that fear capricious winds,
 While, even on shelter'd banks, the timid flowers
 Give, half reluctantly, their warmer hues
 To mingle with the primroses pale stars. (40-1)

The "mingle[d]" values suggest a kind of community. And there is a palpable sense of newly-awakened animation in these images, whose delicacy renders them almost exquisite, but their extreme tentativeness invites the reader to also "fear capricious winds" (40-1). And in fact the vision collapses; under the weight of "so much sorrow," the speaker's "soul / Feels not the joy reviving Nature brings" (41).³ The newly awakened life, "the promise of the infant year," with its "lively verdure" and "bursting blooms" is blasted by sublime "horrors such as War / Spreads o'er the affrighted world" (42). Beautiful nature is overwhelmed and despoiled: "the trumpet's voice / Drowns the soft warbling of the woodland choir; / And violets, lurking in their turfy beds...are stain'd with blood" (43).

The Rousseauian theme of "natural" virtue recurs, surprisingly, in the speaker's meditation on the imprisoned royal family of France. "Hereditary

³ Note the closeness of this passage to Wordsworth's poem, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," which was written five years after *The Emigrants*.

right to rule, uncheck'd" is corrupting, but rather than condemning the possessors of it, the speaker thinks, the "imperial boy" had been better off in an idealized, "humble sphere...free and joyous on the heights / Of Pyrennean mountains," like the "little thoughtless sheperd lad...Reclin'd in playful indolence" (45, 47-8). The speaker exhibits a similar ambivalence toward the nobility as she had toward the French peasants. She sentimentalizes both their former corruption and their present distress. She seems unwilling to follow through on her rambling, if often passionate analysis of tyranny. She calls on those who are quick to condemn the excesses of the revolution to remember "The hecatombs of victims, who have fallen / Beneath a single despot" (45). Yet the picture of the "hapless Queen" is perhaps too close to home and the speaker absolves her, identifying, sentimentally, with her position as a mother: "who knows, / From sad experience, more than I, to feel / For thy desponding spirit, as it sinks / Beneath procrastinated fears for those / More dear to thee than life!" (49-50). Identity is apparently a shifting, unstable matter, and the thought that no-one is "safe," along with a class bias, seems to cancel out other distinctions, or, perhaps more importantly, cause a retreat into sentimental convention.

The speaker is consistently unable, however, to sustain her compensatory impulses and proceeds to deflate her own pastoral idyll of the happy sheperd boy. She cannot sustain her investment in conventions that her

own experience contradicts: "Alas! in rural life, Where youthful dreams / See the Arcadia that Romance describes, / Not even Content resides!" (50). The "youthful dreams" are the speaker's own, and similarly her compensatory moments are often constructed as in the past, or displaced to the "youthful" life of others (50). Now she describes a very different rural scene that is a startling departure from pastoral convention in its genuine sympathy and realistic evocation of the desperate life of the rural poor:

. . . In yon low hut
 Of clay and thatch, where rises the grey smoke
 Of smold'ring turf, cut from the adjoining moor,
 The labourer, its inhabitant...toils
 From the first dawn of twilight, till the Sun
 Sinks in the rosy waters of the West
 . . . bread, and scanty bread, is all he earns
 For him and for his household - Should Disease,
 Born of chill Wintry rains, arrest his arm,
 Then, thro' his patch'd and straw-stuff'd casement peeps
 The squalid figure of extremest Want;
 And from the Parish the reluctant dole,
 Dealt by th'unfeeling farmer, hardly saves
 The ling'ring spark of life from cold extinction (50-1)

There is a clear parallel between the situation of the rural "labourer" and the speaker, in the depiction of the cruelly ironic appearance of Spring, and in the apparently futile but unrelenting and exhausting labour which he must undertake:

. . . the bright Sun of Spring, that smiling bids
 All other animals rejoice, beholds,
 Crept from his pallet, the emaciate wretch [who]
 Attempt[s], with feeble effort, to resume

Some heavy task, above his wasted strength (51)

Throughout the poem, feminine values - the promise of Spring, the soft light of the moon - prove unable to sustain life in a world where masculine force and oppression hold sway. While this theme reflects the wider political reality, it is difficult not to suppose a particular biographical influence as well; Smith's mother died when she was still a small child, and the marriage arranged for her by her father certainly betrayed her own youthful "promise."

The figure of the "emaciate wretch" is perhaps too uncomfortable or too unlikely to be received sympathetically, and the speaker, in a quite surprising gesture, tosses him aside, deferring to an idealized past order in which the ambiguously heroic figure of the departed landowner, at least once, "gave...scatter'd crumbs to honest Poverty" (52). Similarly, the image of rural destitution is cancelled out in a movement to reclaim the peace and safety of the English countryside: "yet Peace is here, / And o'er our vallies, cloath'd with springing corn, / No hostile hoof shall trample" (52). "Nature", the ultimate value in an alienating world containing only shifting and elusive "certainties," must somewhere, if only ideally, remain secured. As a value, it offers an hospitable, protean resource to a consciousness whose access to conventional discourses is compromised. "Nature" is shaped and re-shaped in this poem, responding both to the poet's fear and pain and to her wish for affirmation and coherence. "Nature" is made "safe" in England, where she is "by the rude

sea guarded,” and the threat of the sublime is displaced to France, where nature exists “in wild distemperature...With seasons all revers’d,” besieged by the forces of Terror. The speaker’s description of the devastation of war is filled with elemental, “sublime” images:

The moping clouds fail’d heavy charg’d with rain,
 And bursting o’er the mountains misty brow,
 Deluged, as with an inland sea, the vales;
 Where, thro’ the sullen evening’s lurid gloom,
 Rising, like columns of volcanic fire,
 The flames of burning villages illum’d
 The waste of water (53)

The storm is a conventional image of sublimity, and the water here is the complicated expression of a sublime force which is also the primal element “waste[d]” by the unquenchable fire of war; “Along its troubled surface,” the wind brings the “shrieks” and “groans” of war’s victims (53). Further, war distorts *human* nature: “makes / Man lose his nature; rendering him more fierce / Than the gaunt monsters of the howling waste” (54).

The positive in human nature is implicitly feminine, for it is the feminine, that which sustains life, that is besieged and destroyed by war. War is the ultimate expression of the masculine “sublime” mode of contention and supremacy and will, if unrestrained, destroy *all* life. The value, “life,” is carried by the feminine, and here appears as the mother with her infant, utterly divided from anything that might sustain them and murdered by the sublime forces of war. Ironically, the “wretched Woman...clasping close / To her hard-heaving

heart her sleeping child," flees for "shelter" to a conventionally sublime landscape, "a wild mountain, whose bare summit hides / Its broken eminence in clouds" (55). She listens for "the sound / Of hostile footsteps," but hears only "the cataract, that mutters low / Among the thickets" (55). The sublime "driving tempest bears the cry of Death," and the canon sounds "with deep sullen thunder" (56). What follows parodically recalls the "bursting blooms" and garlands of "beautiful" nature:

. . . bursting in the air, the murderous bomb
 Glares o'er her mansion. Where the splinters fall,
 Like scatter'd comets, its destructive path
 Is mark'd by wreaths of flame! (42, 56)

Finally, the woman is "overwhelm'd / Beneath accumulated horror;" the "beautiful" is murdered by the "sublime" (56). Even in death the woman, "True to maternal tenderness...tries / To save the unconscious infant from the storm," but "The Mother and the Infant perish both!" (57).

While melodramatic, this scene evokes a convincing sense of the woman's fear and her anguish for her child. The description which follows, of the nobleman who returns to his "Castle" to find his family murdered, relies more heavily on the conventionally romantic and sentimental (57). The man is a "feudal Chief" with "Gothic battlements" (57). He returns to his apparently empty home only to stumble over the bodies of "all who us'd to rush / With joy to meet him" (58). Here a man is forced to confront the horrible result of the

politics of the world in which he plays an active, even prominent, part. That result consists in the utter destruction of the private, feminine realm which had sustained him and supported his existence in the wider, public world. Without this life-affirming support, the man's existence is no longer viable. In the response to the man's "fate," the language of sentiment and ideological passion converge in a sublimity that strains its own ability to convey its extreme outrage, just as the maddened figure "Screams unregarded" from the terrible "silence" of his gutted life:

. . . the day dawns
 On a wild raving Maniac, whom a fate
 So sudden and calamitous has robb'd
 Of reason; and who round his vacant walls
 Screams unregarded, and reproaches Heaven! -
 Such are thy dreadful trophies, savage War! (58)

And immediately the speaker proceeds through a litany of the crimes inflicted by "Man...on man," citing "the closet murderers, whom we style / Wise Politicians" for cynical political "schemes" which "Depopulate [Europe's] kingdoms, and consign / To tears and anguish half a bleeding world!" (59).

Again the speaker moves to a compensatory scene, this time clearly displaced into the past. The feminine images of "the promise of the infant year," the early animation of Spring, and the motif of mothers struggling to care for and protect their children converge here with the evocation of the speaker's own idealized childhood in a harmonious and beautiful "nature":

Oh! could the time return, when thoughts like these
 Spoil'd not that gay delight, which vernal Suns,
 Illuminating hills, and woods, and fields,
 Gave to my infant spirits - Memory come! (59)

Here nature is evoked both beautifully and realistically, clearly reflecting the speaker's appreciative and close observation: "from hollows fring'd with yellow broom, / The birch with silver rind, and fairy leaf, / Aslant the low stream trembles" (60). The presence and movement of the water, rather than restless and ominous, here suggests the spring that sustains life. And the speaker, "unconscious then of future ill!" begins to think of herself as having an active, creative life:

. . . I have stood,
 And meditated how to venture best
 Into the shallow current, to procure
 The willow herb of glowing purple spikes,
 Or flags, whose sword-like leaves conceal'd the tide,
 Startling the timid reed-bird from her nest,
 As with aquatic flowers I wove the wreath,
 Such as, collected by the sheperd girls,
 Deck in the villages the turfy shrine,
 And mark the arrival of propitious May. (60)

In her gesture "to procure...the glowing purple spikes, / Or flags" with their "sword-like leaves," the speaker engages with and appropriates to her own use the principle of male power. Having gained her object, she performs the transforming act of weaving her "aquatic flowers" into a wreath that serves as a communal, female offering to the benevolent, again female, figure of "propitious May" (60-1). This sequence, in evoking a feminine creativity and

community under the auspices of an ancient authoritative female figure, “May,” stands in contrast to the masculine world of contention and destruction. But this alternative can exist only in an idealized childhood or past, before the young girl grows up to discover that the world is not hers.

In returning to the unrelenting present the speaker again assumes a debilitated and victimized sense of femininity, in language that links her with the French exiles. She awakens from a “disturb’d and artificial sleep ...To terror and to tears! - Attempting still, / With feeble hands and cold desponding heart, / To save [her] children from...o’erwhelming wrongs” (61).⁴ Like the murdered French woman clutching her child, the speaker’s “faint steps” are pursued by “fearful spectres,” here of “chicane and fraud” (61). Even friendship, which she once thought as lasting as the ideal beauty of the unfading “amaranth” has given way and failed, “as these green fan-like leaves of fern / Will wither at the touch of Autumn’s frost” (62). Yet some still hear, with “patient pity” the speaker’s “long murmurs,” and encourage her to persevere. The mode here is sentimental, and the tone heightens with the expressed wish for death which recalls the desire for “oblivious night” at the opening of the poem:

. . . Ah! yes, my Friends
Peace will at last be mine; for in the Grave
Is Peace - and pass a few short year, perchance
A few short months, and all the various pain

⁴ The “artificial sleep” may have been drug induced. Smith’s letters indicate that she took laudanum to ease the pain of her illnesses (Turner, 84).

I now endure shall be forgotten there,
And no memorial shall remain of me. (62)

Clearly this is Smith's own voice, or at least the voice she uses to evoke her own plight as a woman and a mother, one which continuously interrupts an already restless and fluctuating work. However we respond here to the rhetoric of "sensitivity," we can note the irony of the truth that no "memorial" of Smith shall in fact "remain," and we can appreciate the "complicated woes," the "complicated" subjectivity in fact, that her "grave conceals" (63).

The speaker imagines herself dispersed as "dust" and yet still "provok[ing] the spleen / Of Priest or Levite," for her "Mother's efforts" (63). Her "Mother's efforts" constitute not only her legal battles but of course her writing, her "humble fame" which she must "vindicate" in the appropriate feminine manner, by claiming necessity (however much that is also the case). But the speaker claims more than necessity for her voice; if she must speak from "silence," from outside a position of social and political authority, she will claim the sanction and the preserve of "nature," which also exists "outside" of, and has the advantage of preceding, society:

. . . if, where regulated sanctity
Pours her long orisons to Heaven, my voice
Was seldom heard...yet my prayer was made
To him who hears even silence; not in domes
Of human architecture, fill'd with crowds,
But on these hills, where boundless, yet distinct,
Even as a map, beneath are spread the fields
His bounty cloaths; divided here by woods,

And there by commons rude, or winding brooks (63-4)

The delineation of this territory, “distinct, / Even as a map,” with its variety of features, insists on its reality. And there is a soaring sense of freedom and expansiveness in the scene, paradoxically a beautiful sublimity: “I might breathe the air perfum’d with flowers, / Or the fresh odours of the mountain turf; / And gaze on clouds above me, as they sail’d Majestic” (64). Now the speaker notes a disturbance in the “reddening north,” with “bickering arrows of electric fire” that “Flash on the evening sky” (64). This image recalls, significantly, the “sparks” elicited from “the bold spirit of [the] North” in the French peasants, by “Power’s iron hand / Too strongly struck,” suggesting a similar rebellious “spark” in the woman (64, 20). Similarly, she claims a range of emotions, sublime and beautiful, in saying, “I made my prayer / In unison with murmuring waves that now / Swell with dark tempests, now are mild and blue, / As the bright arch above” (64). Ultimately, the speaker, claiming the authority of nature and the sanction of a beneficent God, asserts the primacy, for her, of “natural,” feminine values, which stand in contrast to bankrupt, masculine values and modes:

... all to me
 Declare[s] omniscient goodness; nor need I
 Declamatory essays to incite
 My wonder or my praise, when every leaf
 That Spring unfolds, and every simple bud,
 More forcibly impresses on my heart
 His power and wisdom (64)

It is "Man" that creates the "variety of woes" that the world suffers, and the speaker calls on the "Power Omnipotent" from on his "high throne," the ultimate authority over "Man," to cause his "creatures" to "cease" from tearing the "bleeding breast" of a feminized "suffering globe" (65). This image of God is ambiguous in the context of the speaker's condemnation here and elsewhere in the poem of "unbounded rule" and regal pomp. Finally, the speaker calls on both a feminine and a *modified* masculine principle, "lovely Freedom, in her genuine charms, / Aided by stern but equal Justice," to "drive...Pride, Oppression, Avarice, and Revenge" from the "fair" earth (66). She asks that the "ill-starr'd wanderers," the exiles, might "regain / Their native country" (66). Freedom and justice are secured through the removal of all forms of tyranny and the assertion of the right to "native" inheritance. And the only strange note in this apparently conventional ending to the poem is the suggestion that the "storms" that have devastated the land may, after all, be cleansing, "driv[ing] noxious vapours from the blighted earth" and "fix[ing a new] reign of Reason, Liberty, and Peace!" (66).

Beachy Head

Beachy Head, With Other Poems, was published posthumously (1807), most of the collection having been written toward the end of Charlotte Smith's life, "during the few and short intervals of ease which her infirmities permitted her to enjoy" (*Beachy Head, With Other Poems*, Advertisement, vii). Smith had spent most of her adult life struggling to support her family through her novel writing, and suffering increasingly from debilitating illnesses which eventually left her crippled (Turner, 83-4). *Beachy Head*, a long poem in blank verse, was written during the last two or three years of her life and was unfinished at the time of Smith's death in 1806 (Turner, 158). It is both interesting and poignant in this context for its poetic, almost epic, exploration of the human and natural history, and the personal significance, of a place that constituted a spiritual home.

Smith was born into the landed gentry and apparently grew up with few restrictions on her movements and the pursuit of her own interests (Hilbish, 24-6). Enjoying the privileges and freedom of her class, Smith as a child came to know intimately and to love the countryside around her father's estate in Sussex, including the Arun river, the South Downs and the uplands to the north (Hilbish, 29). *Beaachy Head* itself is a headland on the Sussex shoreline, "the

first land made,” when crossing the channel from France (Notes, 143). The poem, *Beachy Head*, clearly expresses her nostalgia, her longing in fact, for the sense of freedom and unity of being that she associates with this childhood landscape, as well as her continued love for the many manifestations of life there that she had always taken such delight in, and observed so closely. This evocation of place, then, is very much bound up with the poet’s own life, encompassing memories of childhood as well as mature reflection upon those memories and an expanded sense of the vastness and complexity of life, social and natural, viewed from this vantage point, this “rock sublime” and points around it. The poet’s life and consciousness intersect with place, expressing themselves through the evocation of a natural scene that becomes a psychological, social and spiritual landscape. This is a romantic poetic mode, the same mode through which Wordsworth was composing, contemporaneously, his *Prelude*. Yet Smith’s relationship to her landscape emerges as utterly different and much more complex than Wordsworth’s to his. Far from mastering or absorbing her landscape, the speaker in *Beachy Head* is at best an ephemeral and unstable presence. Similarly, her utterance is uneven and fragmented. This may, in part, be attributed to the lingering effects of the associative structure and interest in process that Frye ascribes to the poetry of “sensibility,” but more importantly, in the terms of this study, it reflects the poet’s problematic relationship to a male-defined poetic tradition.

Significantly, the lyric “I” is almost absent from this lyric expression, which often seems quietly haunted by what Curran describes as a “disembodied sensibility” (“Romantic Poetry,” 200). And the epic tone with which the poem opens is dashed upon the rocks at the base of the headland, by the close of the poem. Similarly, the speaker often seems distant from the aesthetic and social conventions that she employs in a predictable fashion but elsewhere challenges if only implicitly. Yet Smith’s “difference,” in relation to her work and her landscape, constitutes her poetic strength. She is most vibrant when closest to what emerges as a “realistic” nature and organic process, observing with the discernment and interest of a botanist and a naturalist. It is primarily within such moments that a unique aesthetic appears that could be said to suggest “a new model of the Romantic poet” (Pascoe, 9), involving a sublime not only of the minute but of particularity, variety and plurality.

There are clear echoes of *Paradise Lost* in the opening lines of *Beachy Head*, in which the speaker invokes the sublime power of the “stupendous summit” on which she “would recline” and from which “Fancy should go forth, And represent” the genesis of that place, “the strange and awful hour / Of vast concussion” (1). Milton’s invocation reads:

. . . Sing Heav’nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
In the Beginning how the Heav’ns and Earth
Rose out of Chaos (5,6).

Beachy Head, and the island of England, was formed through a primal act of division,

. . . when the Omnipotent
 Stretched forth his arm, and rent the solid hills,
 Bidding the impetuous main flood rush between
 The rifted shores, and from the continent
 Eternally divided this green isle (1-2)

This is a further and more violent division than that by which the Earth is created in Genesis: “God said, ‘Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear’ And it was so” (Genesis 1:9). The sublime act of the male “Omnipotent” evokes the sense of division and fragmentation that pervades the world of *Beachy Head*. There is another, Miltonic, sense of division, in the separation of realms over which the summit presides, “half way at sea,” and “o’er the channel rear’d” (1). The position of Beachy Head suggests a mid-point or transitional place, “the first land made” when crossing the Channel from France (notes, 143) - in a sense, Milton’s beautiful but compromised earth (which is not to extend the analogy to France as heaven and England as hell, though Smith may have had some sympathy with this idea). Milton’s earth exists somewhere between heaven and hell and contains both. It was created as the result of a sublime and violent division in heaven, and it “fell” through the separation of the sensual and the spiritual in the sin of Adam and Eve, yet contains, from the moment of its creation, the promise of reconciliation. Similarly, Smith’s *Beachy Head* contains both the

divided and fallen world and traces of the lost, Edenic home. The meaning of those “traces,” however, is quite different for Smith than for Milton, as I will show.

The implicit reference to Milton marks an aspiration, if a revisionary one, to epic scope, in a work that intends to evoke and encompass a “world,” with its own unique history and significance, natural and social (Abrams, 51).¹ The personal connection of the speaker with this world, and the expression of that connection woven throughout the poem, marks it as lyric, and yet it perhaps may be seen as a revised or hybrid form.

The poem continues, from the invocation and the depiction of the creation of its cosmos, to describe the separation and emergence of light from darkness, in a primal dawn. The speaker continues to participate in the gendered sublime power of the personified “head-land,” the “Imperial lord of the high southern coast!” (2), which affords her an equally sublime view:

Far in the east the shades of night disperse,
Melting and thinned, as from the dark blue wave
Emerging, brilliant rays of arrowy light
Dart from the horizon; when the glorious sun
Just lifts above it his resplendent orb (2)

This male Apollonian light and energy, the first light of creation, both animates and is softened by its contact with the world below it, the “sublime” merging

¹ Curran does not include Smith in his list of women poets of the same period who wrote “poems of epic ambition” (Curran, 1988, 206).

into the “beautiful,” in a sensual play of light and motion: “with feathery silver touched, / The rippling tide of flood; glisten the sands” (2).

There follows an appropriately startling (and realistic) image of burgeoning, clamouring life in the form of seabirds rising, unexpectedly, from the stark “rough hollows” and “chalky clefts” on the “sides precipitous” of Beachy Head. The forbidding, powerful body of the headland, the sublime landscape, is actually host to a teeming and noisy variety of life, clamouring for apparently sparse sustenance. The imagery is primal, primitive, and even suggestive of hell:

...inmates of the chalky clefts that scar
 Thy sides precipitous, with shrill harsh cry,
 Their white wings glancing on the level beam,
 The terns, and gulls, and tarrocks, seek their food,
 And thy rough hollows echo to the voice
 Of the gray choughs, and ever restless daws,
 With clamour, not unlike the chiding hounds (2-3)

Images of sea-birds recur throughout Smith’s poetry, sudden, palpable, emblematic of the presence of starved, but persistent life in even the most inhospitable landscapes. Here they are joined by the shepherd’s “baying dog” and “bleating flock” living on the “turfy crest” of Beachy Head (3). We note here, too, the poet’s attention to particularity; these are not simply sea-birds, but a catalogue of terns, gulls, tarrocks, gray choughs and daws, an assertion of the specifics and the reality of life even under the shadow of the sublime. Further, emerging from the particular, and from the feminine realm of the sea,

the noisy presence of these birds challenges conventional harmonic images of the beautiful. As the symbolic link between sea and sky, the restless and raucous sea-birds disrupt the conventional opposition between the beautiful and the sublime.

From this scene of restless alienation, with its sense of raw, precarious life engendered in the first force of creation, the poem moves past the height of the sun's sublime power, "The high meridian of the day," to evoke a harmonic, more sustaining, "beautiful" image of nature, not inert, but in quiet communion with itself: "And Ocean now, reflecting the calm Heaven, / Is of cerulean hue; and murmurs low / The tide of ebb, upon the level sands" (3). In contrast to the noisy activity of the birds emerging from their forbidding, rocky environment, a "sloop" appears, "her angular canvas shifting still, / Catches the light and variable airs / That but a little crisp the summer sea, / Dimpling its tranquil surface" (3). This image suggests the reflective consciousness of the speaker, communing with, "catching the light and variable airs" of, nature.

But from "Afar off...from the arch immense / Where seem to part the elements," natural and social, and at least in this context, female and male, emerges the (male) social world, in the form of a fishing fleet, and, even "more remote," a "ship of commerce...Bound to the orient climates" (3-4). The distant world evoked by the "ship of commerce" is aligned with the private, organic one, in the depiction of the exploitation of the hidden life of the ocean

and the enslavement of man by man in order to accomplish that exploitation. "Nature" creates by virtue of her being, in play, or in "sport," and it is man's social corruption, his "Erroneous estimate," that transforms Nature's beautiful creations, her "toys," into tokens of exchange (5). Such activity indicates a false and fallen consciousness, alienated from true "Reason" and "natural" wisdom, expressed here in Rousseauist terms:

. . . As Heaven's pure air,
 Fresh as it blows on this aerial height,
 Or sound of seas upon the stony strand,
 Or inland, the gay harmony of birds,
 And winds that wander in the leafy woods;
 Are to the unadulterate taste more worth
 Than the elaborate harmony, brought out
 From fretted stop, or modulated airs
 Of vocal science (5)

In the realm of women, the corruption that transforms gems taken from the feminine "glowing breast" of the Earth into signs of social status worn by "high born" beauties is depicted as a betrayal of real feminine beauty which has its primacy and origin in nature, in "the lovely light / Of the fair star... / Attendant on her queen, the crescent moon," as she "Bathes her bright tresses in the eastern wave" (5-6). As the sun sets, the "beautiful" in nature ascends, in the moon rising "on the opposing side," and in the colours and shapes produced as "floating clouds" soften, and mingle with "The insufferable brightness" of the sun (6-7). The distinction between sublime and beautiful collapses, and these elements mix as the speaker's "Fancy fondly soars, /

Wandering sublime thro' visionary vales," with "bright pavilions" and "wreaths / Of flowers that bloom amid elysian bowers" (6-7). The sun lends a "last ray" of "blazing crimson" to the clouds, and then "yields / To partial darkness" and the softer affective power of the moon's "pearly brilliance on the trembling tide" (7).

Even within this darkened and quiet landscape, the speaker observes the presence of human (again, male) industry in "The fishermen, who at set seasons pass / Many a league off at sea their toiling night" (8). The fishermen, whose work follows the seasons and the inclinations of nature, are not alien to the place or to the night, as they unload "a dark vessel" brought in on the "night tide," and their "busy hum" is heard "resounding...Along the wave-worn rocks" (8). Still, the speaker's consciousness seems removed from them, hovering somewhere, "Yet more remote, / Where the rough cliff hangs beetling o'er its base, / and All breathes repose" (8). Here,

. . . the water's rippling sound is
 Scarce heard; but now and then the sea-snipe's cry
 Just tells that something living is abroad;
 And sometimes crossing on the moonbright line,
 Glimmers the skiff, faintly discern'd awhile,
 Then lost in shadow (8-9)

The stillness and quiet under the shadow of the cliff is beautifully evoked, yet approaches death as nature's process almost stops, "All breathes repose," and the sound and motion of the water fades. The scene is hauntingly existential,

presided over by the cry of the sea-snipe, the bird of crossing ("In crossing the channel this bird is heard at night, uttering a short cry, and flitting along near the surface of the waves," Notes, 145), and by the ephemeral skiff, also "crossing on the moonbright line," and fading from sight, "faintly discern'd awhile, / Then lost in shadow" (8-9). The quiet, reflective feminine mind, imaged in the delicate sloop and the skiff (3), and seeming to emerge away from the overwhelming power of the sublime, under the softer light of the "beautiful," is here threatened by utter darkness. The primitive, hungry cry of the sea-snipe is the unexpected other voice of that waning feminine consciousness which is paradoxically both overwhelmed by and suffering the inaccessibility of sublime power.

Even the fishermen, actively involved in physical work, seem to participate in an energy that is removed from the experience of the speaker. Her observation of this activity leads into a distanced and conventional rehearsal of a glorified, patriarchal history of England, recited by a personified, female "Contemplation," "aloof" and "High on her throne of rock" (9). Still, the recital is impassioned in its defense of the rights, and even the dominion, of the motherland:

Presumptuous hopes, that ever thou again,
 Queen of the isles! shalt crouch to foreign arms.
 ...Never, never thou!
 Imperial mistress of the obedient sea" (11)

The speaker participates here in a *feminized* sublime power that is aligned with the land and with the moral right to freedom and autonomy, and is capable of causing “The extorted sceptre” to “tremble” in the despot’s hand (12). The rather exaggerated fervour of these lines can be read as a response to the sense of endangered and waning life in the previous passage.

The “reflecting mind,” however, “gladly” turns “From even the proudest roll by glory fill’d...To simple scenes of peace and industry” (12). The landscape (now well-defended) radically alters, moving to a rural scene, picturesque and replete with its “lone farm” “bosom’d in some valley of the hills...with granaries and sheds...and by elms and ash / Partially shaded” (12-13). Nature and “honest toil” combine harmonically, but the image is disrupted by a narrative concerning a shepherd who quits this relationship for “Clandestine traffic” in contraband, confronting in this “perilous trade” the resistance of nature represented by “conflicting winds...[a] tossing boat,” and “the heaviest snow-storm of December’s night” (13).

The concept of a harmonious relationship in which nature cooperates with a humanity “content with what the earth affords / To human labour,” and which the “commerce of destruction” ruins, recurs throughout *Beachy Head* (14). Smith employs the convention of the “happy hind”, idealized as a part of nature, having “with his own hands reared on some black moor, / Or turbarry, his independent hut / Cover’d with heather” (14). His

children and his “few sheep” share his “rugged shed” during the winter months, and when spring comes, “the household live / Joint tenants of the waste throughout the day” (14). Still, while the speaker’s observations are apparently made from a leisured distance and perhaps a consciousness too used to physical constraint, there is a realism and animation in the depiction of the natural environment with which this poor family is so intimately connected, and even in the labour that this “savage life” requires, that marks a departure from conventional eighteenth century pastoral (15). In fact the scene and its inhabitants are consciously constructed as “all unlike the poet’s fabling dreams / Describing Arcady” (15). These people, who share the “swamp” with many other varieties of life, “the gemm’d sun-dew” and the “fring’d buck-bean,” scare up, in their daily movements, the emblematic bird of the “waste,” “the plover, that with plaintive cries / Flutters, as sorely wounded, down the wind” (15). Again, the cry of a bird suggests the sublimated recognition of the presence of pain in the landscape; here, an alternative note to the speaker’s conscious insistence on the “free” lives of its inhabitants.

Women and children perform real labour in this landscape (again, a departure from pastoral convention), the “matron” wading, rather unflatteringly like “the black coot,” into “the plashy reeds” to obtain and transform “the long green rush / That well prepar’d hereafter lends its light / To her poor cottage” (15). Such gestures recur throughout Smith’s poetry; in a sense the “green

rush" is nature's "sceptre" (12), a token of her power, lent to those willing to venture into her realm and use her gifts creatively (15, 12). The matron takes her "infant group," like the coot's "diving brood," into the fields, presided over by "the linnet and the finch" to labouriously clear the land of thistles and rocks (15). Here non-human and human life co-exist in sympathy, in a harsh environment:

...On fields that shew
 As angry Heaven had rain'd sterility,
 Stony and cold, and hostile to the plough,
 Where clamouring loud, the evening curlew runs
 And drops her spotted eggs among the flints;
 The mother and the children pile the stones
 In rugged pyramids (15-16)

Such depictions, of the natural world and human life in close connection with it, realistic, keenly observed and animated, constitute Smith's greatest poetic strengths, and exist in distinct contrast with the more conventional formulations that she employs, such as the "sick satiety" of wealth and the inevitable unhappiness of the "child of Luxury" (17). She moves from the scene of hard but "virtuous" toil to consider, using a very beautiful natural metaphor, the illusoriness of happiness, and evokes a biblical sense of spiritual exile in the "world's wilderness":

. . . Happiness! a word
 That like false fire, from marsh effluvia born,
 Misleads the wanderer, destin'd to contend
 In the world's wilderness, with want or woe
 (18)

The world is both a harsh, unyielding wilderness, and a place of beauty, variety and abundance. Those “who have never ask’d / What good or evil means,” those undivided in consciousness, are “happy” in their innocence and the freedom of their physical well-being, like the boy who plays on the river’s edge, yet is unaware of death; freely “venturing in / He gains a bullrush, or a minnow” (18).

The lyric “I” returns, at the heart of the poem, in the speaker’s recollection of her own happy childhood, in “nature”:

I once was happy, when while yet a child,
 I learn’d to love these upland solitudes,
 And, when elastic as the mountain air,
 To my light spirit, care was yet unknown
 (20)

These lines are remarkable for their “early” evocation of what we would now read as a “Wordsworthian” formulation - that of a freedom and unity of being associated with childhood and the state of “nature,” and an inevitable “fall” from innocence. Here, however, Smith’s particular biography seems very close to the text; her marriage at the age of fifteen, with “childhood scarcely passed,” and the ensuing hardships of her life meant a very abrupt and forceful “exile” from the freedom, physical and spiritual, that she had experienced as a girl. In fact, any woman of Smith’s class and time upon entering womanhood became necessarily exiled from the freedom and privilege of her own being, her

movements within the public world severely restricted. The “fallen” environment becomes the diminished, constraining, social one, “the polluted smoky atmosphere / And dark and stifling streets” of the city (20). “Memory” forms the only link with the freedom and integrity of what is here the feminized sublime power of the natural, childhood landscape, “where Vecta breaks / With her white rocks, the strong impetuous tide, / When western winds the vast Atlantic urge / To thunder on the coast - Haunts of my youth!”(20). Here the speaker experienced an equality with her fellow creatures, the co-inhabitants of her landscape, denied her as an adult woman:

... 'twas so pleasant by thy northern slopes
 To climb the winding sheep-path, aided off
 By scatter'd thorns: whose spiny branches bore
 Small woolly tufts, spoils of the vagrant lamb
 There seeking shelter from the noon-day sun
 (21)

Ironically the speaker's social distance from the other human beings in the scene contributes to its idealization. She is free to sit “pleasant[ly]...on the short soft turf,” and observe the exertions of the “labouring wain” and the “sturdy hind”. She is both privileged to be free of such exertions and denied the possibility of ever participating in them.

The idyllic recollection of childhood leads into a wider, social, still idealized “prospect,” in which all exertion is absent. The moral and the natural combine harmonically in the picturesque village, sanctified and blessed by both

its “gray belfry” and the bounty of nature, whose “trees, lovely in spring” are “thick” with “autumnal plenty” (22). This ideal landscape in which the seasons are compressed, suggesting eternal summer, is a far remove from Smith’s more animated and realistic natural descriptions.

The passage that follows again evokes a realistic nature. Images of sensual and beautiful abundance multiply with the myriad of flowers in the country “cottage garden” which is “most for use design’d / Yet not of beauty destitute” (23). The sensual explosion of colour and variety is catalogued and detailed in the “briar...And pansies rayed, and freak’d and mottled pinks...among balm, and rosemary and rue...[where] honeysuckles flaunt, and roses blow / Almost uncultured” (23). The cultivation, and the pleasure taken in this beautiful display, belongs to the community of women, and the speaker recalls “With fond regret,” the “delight” taken, “Among these cottage gardens,” in the “artless nosegays, knotted with a rush / By village housewife or her ruddy maid” (24). Here, within this female space, this “locus of female work and duty,” the speaker is closer to her fellow inhabitants than she is to the “labouring wain” or the “happy hind” (Pascoe, 9). Yet while she momentarily shares in what she sees as the simplicity of village life, “soon and simply pleas’d,” receiving the flowers as tokens of a natural, feminine community, the speaker was never the equal of the “housewife” or her “maid”, nor does she share in their labour. Her distance from them and this place is aestheticized

through wistful nostalgia, but it also constitutes pain. The difference between the speaker and the village women is displaced in the compensatory, in fact celebratory sense of equality in difference, of democracy, in the abundant variety and common irrepressibility of the flowers of the garden, where “briar” grows “among the July flowers,” and “pansies...among balm,” where roses, “Almost uncultured,” emerge from “dark green leaves” or “thorny moss,” “Some [with]...flowers of pure unsullied white; Others...of richest crimson” (23).

Here, I believe, is the meaning of Smith’s investment in, her celebration of, the infinite variety of the natural world, her frequent “explosion[s] of dazzling specificity” (Pascoe, 9). It is the response of a socially and even physically alienated sensibility, seeking meaning in the non-social, organic world and recognizing, sometimes subliminally and sometimes quite consciously, the alienation of others. It is the displacement of an aspiration to freedom and equality of expression, to the full privilege of selfhood, a state associated with a childhood “in nature,” and with nature herself. The gendering is specific here, for while the natural world of *Beachy Head* contains both male and female, and mixed elements, it is feminine nature, or the feminine in nature, whose freedom is at stake. Significantly, as well, the investment is in immanence rather than the transcendence which accompanies the sublime, and tends to be figured in unremarked life, as in the hidden life of the ocean, or flowers underfoot.

The passage that follows further develops this aesthetic of specificity and plurality and illustrates as well that it is a “wild,” or “free” nature, more than the woman’s garden (as Pascoe suggests) that fulfills this poetic vision. The speaker places her youthful self, “An early worshipper at Nature’s shrine,” not within the social world but within a kind of alternative “natural,” non-human society, among “her [nature’s] rudest scenes - warrens and heaths, / And yellow commons, and birch-shaded hollows” (24). Organic process, nature’s interconnectedness, takes on a quality of almost social interaction, in “the clasping woodbine / Where purple tassels of the tangling vetch / With bittersweet, and byrny inweave, / And the dew fills the silver bindweed’s cups” (24). The speaker feels nurtured and physically at ease within this environment:

I loved to trace the brooks whose humid banks
Nourish the harebell, and the freckled pagil;
And stroll among o’ershadowing woods of beech,
Lending in Summer, from the heats of noon
A whispering shade (24-5)

Here, “Some pensive lover of uncultur’d flowers,” like the speaker herself, is free to gather the wild, unforced beauties of nature, beauties which rival human “art”:

the wood
sorrel, with its light thin leaves,
Heart shaped, and triply folded; and its root
Creeping like beaded coral...anemones,

With rays like golden studs on ivory laid
Most delicate (25)

The profusion of colour and texture, and the jewel-like detail in these passages is almost ornate. The pleasure taken is exactly in the colour and variety of what is seen, for its own sake. The assertion of variety and particularity becomes a kind of advocacy. Naomi Schor has shown how the detail, ornate or prosaic, has historically been associated with the “merely” sensual and the feminine, and considered not only an inferior aesthetic mode but menacingly anarchic. This of course is precisely the point, in an aesthetic that speaks for “uncultur’d” or marginalized life. Anarchy, which operates on a horizontal plane, unlike the vertical hierarchy of the sublime, opens up potential space for women’s expression. Here, too, are manifestations of “the beautiful” deliberately “contaminated” by specificity and contingency rather than evoked as participating in a transcendent ideal (Hernstein Smith, 69).

The speaker introduces the next passage with a more Rousseauian formulation of “nature” versus “art,” in nature’s picturesque “views,” versus “The Poet and the Painter’s utmost art,” but then moves again into her much loved close observation, now of “the strange and foreign forms / Of sea-shells...fantastic shapes / Of bivalves, and inwreathed volutes” mysteriously mixed with “the pale calcareous soil” of the hill (25-6). The language here, as with the language used to describe plant life, is exact and specific, and reflects

Smith's study of natural science as well as botany (Hilbish, 217). The notes remark that she had made her observations of the sea fossils at Beachy Head many years ago, when she "knew nothing of natural history," and that she has not been satisfied with the scientific "conjecture" on such phenomena that she has read. Her careful notes, giving the scientific names for plant and animal life where they do not appear in the poetry, specific locations described in some of the passages, and providing background information on historical or anecdotal references, as well as her use of scientifically exact descriptions in her poetry assert "a claim to scientific authority" (Pascoe, 7). Smith also, however, reserves the right both to dispute from within scientific discourse, and to stand outside of it. She is unconvinced, but inspired by the idea that "this range of chalky mountains, once / Form[ed] a vast bason, where the Ocean waves/ Swell'd fathomless," in a time before there "Grew up a guardian barrier, 'twixt the sea / And the green level of the sylvan weald" (26-7). It is the poetic resonance of the theory she explores that interests Smith, who is equally intrigued with her own thought that perhaps "Nature," in sheer creative playfulness, "in wanton mood," mimics on land, the "fantastic shapes...that cling / To the dark sea-rock of the wat'ry world"(26). Such images "playfully" challenge the aesthetic opposition between "feminine" and "masculine" realms in the world which the speaker has inherited. This poetic "conjecture" also distinguishes itself from the strictly religious and moral connotations that

accompanied the proper study of the natural world for eighteenth century women: “Natural Philosophy for women was tantamount to religious training: the study of Nature should always lead to love of God, our beneficent Creator” (Meyer, 72-3). God, as we have seen, is invoked only once, and in a formal way, in *Beachy Head*; He is the sublime power responsible for dividing what was once whole, creating the fallen world. Overwhelmingly in *Beachy Head*, poetic or spiritual significance is invested in the *immanent* world.

Nature herself contains the source and the destination of our theorizing and our mythologizing about our world and our condition. Nature eludes “Science’ proudest boast,” the peasant’s hopes for good weather, and the assaults of mankind’s long history of conquest (27). Like the “lone antiquary,” a displaced figure for herself, “who on times remote...loves to contemplate,” the speaker considers the conventional epic “march” of history and its negation in “Time” and death, which renders equal “the savage native” and “the centurion,” buried in the same earth (29). The theme of tyrannical “Ambition” seen in the earlier parallel passage is picked up again, but here violation is located not in the nation state, but in “the oppressed Earth” itself:

. . . Hither, Ambition, come!
 Come and behold the nothingness of all
 For which you carry thro’ the oppressed Earth,
 War, and its train of horrors (29)

But Earth, and specifically the “downs” of the speaker’s childhood home, is able to resist and dispel the menacing shadow cast by sublime forces: “Even as the clouds, with dark and dragon shapes, / Or like vast promontories crown’d with towers, / Cast their broad shadows on the downs...their transient gloom is soon forgotten” (30). The darkness of “human crimes” is aligned with the sublime in nature, and the reference to “vast promontories” recalls the “sublime summit” in its menacing, overwhelming aspect (1-2, 8). The assault, in both cases, comes from male forces: male armies and the natural power associated with the “Imperial lord of the high southern coast” (2).

The passages that follow seem to assert, or re-assert, the interconnected values of natural and social harmony, through the depiction of a beautiful, harmonic and a picturesque nature, through mixed, not specifically gendered elements. They combine romantic convention with Smith’s characteristic fresh and detailed natural descriptions. Rustic “shepherd girls” offer flowers to another male figure in the landscape, “the wanderer of the hills” (30). The flowers, if not the wanderer, are “Of wondrous mockery,” providing another illustration of nature’s playful creativity and mimicry, “some resembling bees...While others mimic flies” (30). The catalogue of natural beauty that follows is inter-involved and animated, again suggesting community:

. . . in the breeze
That wafts the thistle’s plumed seed along,
Blue bells wave tremulous. The mountain thyme

Purples the hassock of the heaving mole,
 And the short turf is gay with tormentil,
 And bird's foot trefoil, and the lesser tribes
 Of hawkweed; spangling it with fringed stars. (31)

The notes meticulously document the specificity and reality of all that is evoked, giving scientific names - "Trifolium ornithopoides" for "Bird's foot trefoil" - and correcting misconceptions, including Linnaeus' mistake of "too rashly esteem[ing] all those [flowers] which resemble insects, as forming only one species" (167, 165-6). Again the insistence on specificity and particularity suggests an advocacy of those qualities which takes on social connotations, and is simultaneously an advocacy of immanence over transcendence. As with the passage concerning the "tenants of the waste," the poet moves beyond convention in describing some of the *social* particulars of this landscape, which has now moved into the picturesque, with its "cultur'd land...burnished by the sun," inhabited by a shepherd and his boy (14, 31). Wild and social nature collaborate to support an interconnected existence in a "natural" economy: "from the pit-falls [the boy] takes / The timid migrants, who from distant wilds, / Warrens, and stone quarries, are destined thus / To lose their short existence," and "the Shepherd still protects / The social bird, who from his native haunts...Follows the fleecy croud, and flirts and skims / In fellowship among them" (31-2). The "view" then broadens again, aspiring to appropriate imaginatively - "if the eye could reach so far" - even "the mart / Of England's

capital" to the local, natural scene, so that, "its domes and spires" merge with "the distant range of Kentish hills...in purple haze" (33). This appropriation seeks to naturalize the (conveniently) distant commercial economy of London. The juxtaposition with "the ruin'd battlements / Of [a] dismantled fortress", now occupied by "a tiller of the soil," places the capitol within the context of epic time and the ultimately superior force of natural, organic decay (34).

Beachy Head closes with two narratives of marginalized, male figures living within, or in the case of the last, on the edge of, its landscape. As we have seen, the figures in the poem's landscape are overwhelmingly male, often embodying some conventional male social role that suggests but is inaccessible to the speaker: the "lone antiquary" or the "wanderer of the hills". The two closing narratives can be read as parables of the speaker's own self-consciousness, one romantically idealized, and the other starkly existential. The male romantic poet, "a stranger," appears within the landscape to make his home on the edges of society, "Among the ruins" of human history (34-5). True to his role, he "wander[s]" amidst the natural scene and sits musing by himself late into the evening (35). The local "village maidens" consider that "the lonely man...must have been cross'd in love," but his "complain[t]...of cold neglect / And baffled hope" is suggestive of the poet's own sensibility and unchosen marginality (35-6). Ironically, the figure of the isolated young poet/lover carries more authority than the alienated consciousness of the

speaker, the woman poet, which finds no historically recognized literary vehicle. That this is so, seems to be echoed in the conventional formulation of the young man's "song," "Were I a Shepherd on the hill" (36). Were the speaker the validated figure of the male poet writing through received formulations, perhaps her existence, as a poet and as a social being, would feel more substantial. Were the speaker the male poet in the landscape, or perhaps even his "Shepherd on the hill," perhaps she "Could see," could "Believe," and "Could say," that her vision, here figured as the female beloved, had an enduring meaning, or at least a recognizable one, and that she might be remembered for it: "And you [the beloved], however late, might yet / With sighs to Memory giv'n, regret / The Shepherd of the Hill" (38).

Fortunately, the speaker/poet does not express herself, simply, through received convention or even form, which accounts for the great interest of her poetry. Similarly, her construct of the young, male "visionary" as an idealized figure of herself cannot be sustained, even by the "flattering pencil" of "Hope" which nonetheless "soothe[s] *his* soul," at least for a time, with "Ideal bowers of pleasure" (46, 38, emphasis mine). His "hermit life," and implicitly his refuge in fantasy, renders the man increasingly "wild" or asocial, increasingly in a subject position parallel to that of the marginalized speaker: "His home was in the forest; and wild fruits / And bread sustain'd him" (38-9). He becomes a restless, disembodied presence in the forest, seen only by

“Barkmen” and “Wedgecutters,” as he moves “thro the distant thicket” (39).

Finally he, like the vanishing skiff, “on the moonbright line,” disappears into darkness:

Belated villagers from fair or wake,
While the fresh night-wind let the moonbeams in
Between the swaying boughs, just saw him pass,
And then in silence, gliding like a ghost
He vanish'd ! Lost among the deepening gloom.
(8, 39)

Here again is an image of the speaker's own precarious consciousness.

Starved for light and sustenance, a life fades silently from existence, waning under the auspices of the pale, feminine moon. Throughout the poem, the feminine power of the “beautiful” is unable to sustain life in the context of a masculine world.

The only traces left of the unstable life of the poet are his equally unstable utterances, “love-songs and scatter'd rhymes, / Unfinish'd sentences, or half erased” (39). The poet's words are described as almost organic products of the forest, found among the “wreathed roots” of “one ancient tree,” utterances paradoxically existing outside of a social context, unseen and unreceived (39). The parting “rhapsody” of the dead poet in fact constructs a “natural,” compensatory alternative to the social world in the beautiful, harmonic “green retreat” which the speaker prepares for his beloved (43).

This Edenic world is hospitable, pleasurable and replete, naturally sustaining of human life almost without effort:

...I'll contrive a sylvan room
 Against the time of summer heat,
 Where leaves, inwoven in Nature's loom,
 Shall canopy our green retreat (43)

It is a world blessed by a feminine, beautiful nature:

Retiring May to lovely June
 Her latest garland now resigns;
 The banks with cuckoo-flowers are strewn,
 The woodwalks blue with columbines (41)

And even as winter approaches, nature provides a secure, womb-like "shelter," in "The forest hermit's lonely cave [where] / None but...soothing sounds shall reach" (44). This poem, as was the last by the lonely "visionary," is dedicated to the idealized feminine figure of the absent beloved:

Oh! could I hear your soft voice there,
 And see you in the forest green
 All beauteous as you are, more fair
 You'd look, amid the sylvan scene (45)

This feminine presence in absence suggests the unstable "feminine" values or vision which the poet tries to assert throughout *Beachy Head*, encompassing both female nature, the lost ideal of the poet's childhood, and the ephemeral figure of the poet's own unrealized "nature".

This idyll of compensatory, "beautiful" nature concentrates and simplifies a motif that runs throughout *Beachy Head*. Taken on its own,

extricated from the other elements that together comprise the world of the poem, the “beautiful” cannot be sustained as a poetic vision:

Ye phantoms of unreal delight,
 Visions of fond delirium born!
 Rise not on my deluded sight,
 Then leave me drooping and forlorn (46)

Still, the speaker can allow her male alter-ego his hopes - “Oh! let him cherish his ideal bliss” - at least for as long as he lives (47). But while this man’s life and death remain a romanticized idealization of the speaker’s own position, with or without his mediation she herself is divested of the “fragile flowers” of hope. She, in fact, shares much more in common with the solitary, though still ironically male figure whose death ends the poem, “one who long disgusted with the world / And all its ways, appear’d to suffer life / Rather than live” (47-8). In contrast to the preceding romantic tale, this almost surreal and certainly existential narrative is based on what the poet understands to be the true story of one “Parson Darby” who lived on the edge and at the base of the sublime, forbidding landscape that opened the poem, “Just beneath the rock / Where Beachy overpeers the channel wave, / Within a cavern mined by wintry tides” (47). This complex image suggests a life de-“based,” almost literally crushed, and overshadowed by the weight and presence of an overwhelming force. The female space, the “cavern,” provides no protection and is helplessly subject to the assaults of a harsh, elemental nature. In fact the cavern in the rock is the

precarious site where the elements in nature, male and female, meet: the rocky headland, the raging wind and the female body of the sea, here the desolate “wintry tides” (47). The changeable sea, conventionally a sublime as well as a female image, embodies a sublimated, elemental feminine consciousness. This potentially overwhelming sublime force remains mysterious and inarticulate, itself overwhelmed by raging storms, producing from that conflict the dead victims which wash up on the hermit’s rough beach. This landscape threatens all life within it; the helpless “little careless sheep,” plunge “headlong” to their deaths from the “brink” of the rock (48). The besieged and alienated figure of the “lonely man” is so starved for sustenance that he can no longer feel nature’s animating breath: “the soul-reviving gale, / Fanning the bean-field, or the thymy heath, / Had not for many summers breathed on him” (51,48). Yet he still feels an emotional anguish which is the inheritance of having lived a betrayed life, and which is the source of his sympathy for others:

. . . his heart
 Was feelingly alive to all that breath’d;
 And outraged as he was, in sanguine youth,
 By human crimes, he still acutely felt
 For human misery (48)

Long alienated from human society, even the man’s former life affirming sense of connection with nature is damaged. All that remains of this connection is his ability, also lent by a wounded sensibility, to “augur” nature’s changing moods,

particularly the potential storms that might emerge from the unstable seascape. He watches and listens for signs of this threat, the threat of death, which hangs forebodingly over the restless life of the sea, imaged in “the changing colours of the sea, / And sullen murmurs of the hollow cliffs, / Or the dark porpoises, that.../ Gambol...on the level brine” (49). And the threat materializes, “dr[iving] / The billows with o’erwhelming vehemence” (49).

This is a painfully existential portrait, filled with echoes from the speaker’s, and Charlotte Smith’s, own life and sensibility. The speaker considers herself “condemned, A guiltless exile” from society, and she, too, sought compensation in communion with the natural world (20). Smith, toward the end of her life, was physically debilitated and mentally and emotionally exhausted, and must have felt as starved for sustenance in a harsh world as the “pale recluse” she depicts, living on the edge of death (50). In her poem, as in her reality, the feminine cannot sustain life in the context of the overwhelming power of the masculine sublime. As the storm rages, “The dismal gleaming of the clouded moon” presides over the “conflict dread” of the shipwrecked mariner, fighting for his life in the waves (49). He, himself, is “now just seen, now lost in foaming gulphs” (49). And, inevitably, the “slow swell [of] the tide of morning” produces the deadly evidence, the “blue swol’n cor’sse,” of the death that takes place in the sea (50). The “pale recluse,” who tries to save the man, grimly “D[igs] in the chalk a sepulchre” which will soon

be his own (50). Finally, he too is killed by the overwhelming force of the sublime, on a “dark night” when the wind blows “Fierce on the shore; - the bellowing cliffs [shake] / Even to their stony base, and fragments [fall] / Flashing and thundering on the angry flood” (50). The man who spent the latter part of his life trying to save those who, disinherited like himself, were shipwrecked by the storm, now dies in that storm. And the speaker is left with only the pious, and feminine, hope that, “dying in the cause of charity,” the man’s “spirit [will from its earthly bondage [be] freed” (51).

Conclusion

Smith's work in *The Emigrants* and *Beachy Head* presents us with the bleak portrayal of a besieged and marginalized sensibility. But her work also constitutes a powerful critique, both conscious and implicit, of the patriarchal mode of supremacy, figured aesthetically as the sublime. As well, she critiques the restrictions of conventionally constituted femininity and domesticity, while at the same time investing the beautiful with new meaning. She accomplishes these effects by revising and deploying to her own use available discourses such as the opposition between the sublime and the beautiful, the picturesque, and "sensibility." Similarly, while Smith's interests participate in wider fashions of her day, her work gives particular meaning to those interests. The study of botany, for example, was considered appropriate to women in the 1790s, but Smith not only employs this experience to evoke fresh and realistic natural detail, but invests in the natural world she observes values which can find no place in her social and political world - plurality, variety, equality in difference.

Smith's ambiguity in relation to some of the modes she employs, her inconsistency in fact, reflects a complicated subject position which has no "native" tradition or mode of its own. While gender inequality was recognized

and debated, especially in the context of the French revolution, the invisibility of women's history and women's experience of subjectivity meant, as it still means, at best a fragmented means of expression. And the attempt to use dominant, authoritative discourses was, of course, problematic. Thus we see in Smith's work the same motifs employed in different places to very different uses, evoking diverging, even contradictory, values. In this way an apparent disadvantage is used creatively.

Finally, we find in both *The Emigrants* and *Beachy Head*, a startlingly modern, existential tone and landscape, the sublimated expression of the experience of alienation and dispossession. In the primal seascape of both poems the powerful elements in nature meet and contend, and *all* of life is threatened by this division and contention. Yet, ultimately, it is a ravaging, sublime force that holds sway in Charlotte Smith's poetic world.

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