

Nature "so akin to pleasure and pain": Abjection  
and Sublimity in Wollstonecraft's *Short Residence*  
*in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*

by

Heather Megan Harper  
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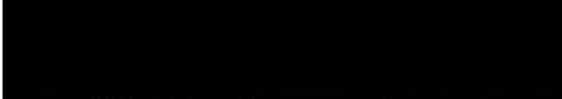
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\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Gordon Fulton, Supervisor (Department of English)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Thomas Cleary, Departmental Member (Department of  
English)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Mary Ellen Ross, Outside Member (Department of French)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Elizabeth Schellenberg, External Examiner (Department of  
English, Simon Fraser University)

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Supervisor: Dr. Gordon Fulton

ABSTRACT

I suggest that Wollstonecraft's sublime landscape aesthetic in *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* is a response to woman's historical position at the boundary between nature and culture. Creating a dialectic between Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic analysis of cross-cultural abjections of the "feminine" in *Powers of Horror* and Wollstonecraft's ambivalent response to popular metaphors of nature as sensual, maternal or threatening "femininity", I will argue that Wollstonecraft's sublime transcendence symbolizes or translates this abjected body of woman/nature. Chapter one suggests that the visibility of the feminine (excessive or resplendent) in Wollstonecraft's travel narrative explains tensions in her account of woman's self-governance. Chapter two examines this "translation" in the context of the Romantic (egotistical) sublime, an encounter which ultimately insists on Wollstonecraft's own position both inside and outside of culture.

Examiners:

[Redacted]

Dr. Gordon Fulton, Supervisor (Department of English)

[Redacted]

Dr. Thomas Cleary, Departmental Member (Department of English)

[Redacted]

Dr. Mary Ellen Ross, Outside Member (Department of French)

[Redacted]

Dr. Elizabeth Schellenberg, External Examiner (Department of English, Simon Fraser University)

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## Introduction

Wollstonecraft's treatise "On Poetry", her contributions to Joseph Johnson's *Analytical Review* and her fiction all demonstrate a late eighteenth-century interest in the psychological<sup>1</sup> effects of the subject's extra-cognitive movement to spiritual or transcendent heights through the sublimity (loftiness, power, energy) of nature or art. With its own particular history and conventions, the sublime is an aesthetic and a political discourse that impels the writing subject to the limits of representation: to an encounter with alterity, emotional and linguistic excess and instability through which the subject defines his or her "self". And it is this component of personal experimentation which has multiple significances for Mary Wollstonecraft's travel narrative, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*.<sup>2</sup> For both Wollstonecraft's sublime strategy and her confessional form strive for woman's integration into aesthetic and political spheres with which, as a cast-off mistress travelling through masculinist and commercially-dominated countries, Wollstonecraft was not wholly at ease.

Arguably, it is the concept of "self" in relation to natural forces which constitutes a volatile relationship between the female subject and aesthetic authority in *A Short Residence*. Although instances of the sublime often evade precise definition and blend into one another in the travel narrative, there is a tendency in recent criticism to read Wollstonecraft's use of the sublime strictly in terms of her departure from an anticipatory relationship with the Romantic or egotistical<sup>3</sup> sublime, a traditionally "masculine" literary mode. However, a moment of Romantic sublimity poses problems in a woman's text because it involves a pleasure in looking which actually amounts to visual containment and a

narcissistic subterfuge for the artist's self-preservation. The spectator transforms his identification with the creative potential of a (usually) feminized natural object into a moment of transcendence, thereby achieving a feeling of unity through the obliteration of the object's otherness.<sup>4</sup> Thus a woman employing this particular sublime strategy finds her symbolic function amounts to mythical obstacle, and to achieve transcendence and empowerment, she would have to split her identification into two: into a viewing, active subject and a framed, static territory on which a battle is waged.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, recent feminist literary criticism, namely Patricia Yaeger's "Toward a Female Sublime", locates an impossibility for women in the "normal retrieval of mythic powers that are initially alienated in order to insure their internalization". This "energy is finally reappropriated, so as to strengthen the ego," but, for a woman, Yaeger claims such retrieval is culturally defined as "abnormal or deviant".<sup>6</sup>

The response to this refusal or impossibility on the part of women writers to engage in what Yaeger terms "self-centered imperialism"(192) has been twofold, and neither satisfactorily describes Wollstonecraft's approach to lofty landscapes in her travel narrative. On the one hand there is the assumption that landscape depictions of progressive late-eighteenth century women artist's gravitated easily towards "community, generosity, sympathy, delight, connection and intimacy", rather than transcendence, spectacle and aggressive individualism.<sup>7</sup> Yet, as I will argue, Wollstonecraft often approaches nature (and indeed cultural assumptions about nature as a "feminine" realm) with a great deal of mistrust. Furthermore, this domestic, less courageous sublimity denies

Wollstonecraft the grand, solitary moments of empowering transcendence which I believe help her negotiate the question of woman's access to a cultural realm. On the other hand, psychoanalytic explications (the most powerful dubbed by Yaeger the "pre-oedipal" sublime) allow the female writer to reclaim "mother" nature through the sublime experience, suggesting that libidinal elements break through woman's consciousness and enable her empowerment through a longing for otherness.<sup>8</sup> In terms of transcendence this is a more satisfying theory, but it too is problematized by the fact that Wollstonecraft finds many encounters with nature and sublimity quite painful and terrifying rather than ecstatic or even comfortable.

It is this discomfort or beseeching and worrying moment, which sometimes prevents Wollstonecraft from engaging in sublimity and at other times necessitates transcendence, which interests me. Setting up a dialectic between Wollstonecraft's sublime transcendence and Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic and anthropological theory in *Powers of Horror*<sup>9</sup> reveals the necessity of Wollstonecraft's insistence on woman's access to culture and her simultaneous abjection of the "feminine". For I will suggest that her problematic distinctions between the conceptual categories, masculine and feminine, nature and culture and reason and passion--her dependence on the object-status of the feminine in her landscape aesthetics--are linked to what Kristeva describes as the exclusion of defiling elements or more explicitly, the abject. Exploring various "pre-objects"(32), non-objects and, above all, the "confrontation with the feminine"(58), Kristeva makes an argument for the "frailty of the subject's signifying system"(35).<sup>10</sup> Defining the abject, she claims

that, much like the sublime, it does not have a "definable object"; rather the object is that which is "opposed to the I": it beckons, incites fascination but "disturbs identity, system order", not through its uncleanness (though filth is an attribute of the object) but by "draw[ing] me toward the place [the mother as the pre-object of need] where meaning collapses", for the object is that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules"(1-2).

The sublime enables Wollstonecraft to subsume this threat of the feminine, but also to trace the peril of its necessary absence. Examining her tendency to play in and out of traditional landscape descriptions and weighing the "frailty" of subjectivity Kristeva speaks of against the (Romantic) sublime's illusive sense of unity, I will suggest that Wollstonecraft's essentializing distinctions (masculine/feminine, reason/passion, pure/impure) allow her to control her fear of the feminine but also to express her own (abjected) desires. My first chapter will examine Wollstonecraft's anxiety of bodily excess as a movement to absorb and acknowledge the object through the sublime. My second chapter looks at this acknowledgement in the context of Wollstonecraft's ambivalent relationship to the Romantic sublime's forceful construction of self, a metaphor which is at odds with her communal aspirations. As such, I expect a study of Wollstonecraft's sublime mode (which both embraces a metaphor of sublime ascendancy and incorporates an antisocial longing to dissolve meaning) will shed some light on apparent tensions in her account of woman's moral agency.

1.This is often seen as a shift in interest from the moral utility of aesthetics to cognitive or emotional effects. When Wollstonecraft formulated her sublime aesthetics in the late eighteenth-century, a transformation was observable in poetry, painting and landscape aesthetics, from an empiricist emphasis on psychophysical or ocular sublimity, to Romantic emphasis on the personal and performative transaction between visual perception of external nature and the imagination. Of the sensual eye, Blake wrote "I look through it and not with it." Furthermore, "while the sublime resided first in the style in which elevated ideas were expressed, it eventually came to mean the elevated ideas themselves". Ralph Cohen "The Sublime: In Alchemy, Aesthetics and Psychoanalysis", *Modern Philology* 56 1977. The sublime poetics which undeniably inform *A Short Residence's* emphasis on external nature's production of such emotions as privation and self-preservation range widely: Milton, Edward Young, James Thomson, Thomas Gray, William Cowper, Ann Radcliffe and Charlotte Smith and, apart from its emphasis on psychophysical tension and its gendering of aesthetics, Burke's *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* are all influences on it.

2.*Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, ed. Richard Holmes (London: Penguin, 1987). The title will be shortened to *A Short Residence* in subsequent references.

3.The "wordsworthian" or "egotistical sublime" is also practised by Coleridge and Shelley. The phrase "egotistical sublime" is Keats', for he disapprovingly claims Wordsworthian mastery is "a thing per se" that "stands alone". In Keats' opinion, to recognize the sublime is to have "no self". See "Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818," in *John Keats*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), 418-19.

4.The grandeur of an imposing object or person (such as Shelley's skylark or Wordsworth's leechgatherer) representing mythic, transcendent power is internalized by the poet, who first celebrates then laments its terrific externality. For example, Shelley's "Mont Blanc" is a prototype for metaphorical ego-affirmation in which the poet attempts to imitate the "untamable wildness and inaccessible solemnity" of the sublime object but, ultimately, subdues it (likewise the "earth, and stars, and sea"(142), by making its powers contingent upon his own creative abilities, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. ed. M.H. Abrams, 5th ed. (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), 685.

5.Although the sublime is, traditionally, "masculine", and contrasted with a supine and trivial "feminine" beauty, the Romantic spectator participates in an "oedipal" voyeurism that feminizes the threatening landscape. As Neil Hertz and Thomas Weiskel explain, the male desire to merge with the sublime object suggests the struggle between the self and the other can be read as a staged confrontation which conceals a primordial longing to merge with the mother. See Neil Hertz, "The Notion of blockage in the literature of the sublime", in *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text: Selected Papers for the English Institute 1976-77*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978). Also

see Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. (Baltimore: John Hopkin's UP, 1976). They do not consider the possibility of a female confrontation; however, a Freudian or Lacanian explication would declare the subterfuge of conflict impossible within the Symbolic or the cultural realm, since woman's "relationship with her origin must needs be cancelled--as well as her original relationship with her mother and her sex. . . --if the domination of the Phallus is to be established." Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974) 43.

6. Patricia Yaeger, "Toward a Female Sublime", *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, ed. Linda Kauffman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 210.

7. For analyses of the "domestic sublime", see William C. Snyder, "Mother Nature's Other Natures: Landscape in Women's Writing, 1770-1830", *Women's Studies* 21 (1992) 143-162 and Jeanne Moskal, "The Picturesque and the Affectionate in Wollstonecraft's Letters from Norway", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 52 (1991), 278. There are exceptions to the claim that women did not engage in a "masculine" assertion of viewer supremacy. For example, in a letter to Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Carter locates creative supremacy in the processes of her own perception as well as in the thunderstorm she describes:

The first impression [the sea and the storm] gave me was a sense of my own littleness, and I seemed shrinking to nothingness in the midst of the stupendous objects by which I was surrounded. But I soon grew more important by the recollection that nothing which my eyes could survey, was of equal dignity with the human mind, at once the theatre and spectator of the wonders of Omnipotence. (qtd. in Monk, 216).

8. Again Moskal argues that Wollstonecraft's role as mother reenacts her pre-oedipal attachment to her own mother and her desire for a mother-child bond in the context of a bisexual marriage. Consequently, this nurturing stance is "latent in women's *normal* relationship to the world and experience of self"[my emphasis] and renders Wollstonecraft's sublime a matter of weighing the "generative categories of sterility and fertility", the sublime associated with the former and the beautiful with the latter.

9. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia UP), 1982.

10. At the beginning of chapter two of her "essay", Kristeva claims that the traditional psychoanalytic definition of object relations as it is articulated within the Oedipal triangle is "exploded by its contradictions and flimsiness", and she articulates the standard psychoanalytic definition of object relation: "According to the trope, the father is the mainstay of the law and the mother the prototype of the object. Toward the mother there is convergence not only of survival needs but of the

first mimetic yearnings. She is the other subject, an object that guarantees my being as subject. The mother is my first object--both desiring and signifiable"(32). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982).

## Chapter one: The Abject and the Spectacular

Questions of physical desire in Wollstonecraft's texts are usually examined in the context of her anti-sensualist ideals of female self-control: her disembodied, domestic and middle-class attack on fashionable corruption. Although it has been suggested that she is more tolerant of physical love in *A Short Residence* than she is in her more polemical texts,<sup>1</sup> I will argue that her fear of weak and seductive female desire persists as a refusal to reduce nature to an object of spectacle. For Wollstonecraft recognizes that the voyeuristic<sup>2</sup> gaze in late eighteenth-century landscape aesthetics is a strategy which both reifies woman's intellectual dependence on men and limits her to gratifying libertine pleasures.

In itself this argument offers little new insight into Wollstonecraft's ideal of woman's rigorous moral and intellectual reform. However, her particular use of the sublime in *A Short Residence* provides a basis for recontextualizing her challenge to woman's exclusion from a cultural realm; for Wollstonecraft's symbolization and transcendence of a feminized "body" of nature not only allows us to "see" what she believes is at stake in metaphors of hierarchy, but, more importantly, suggests her sublimation of nature displaces an anxiety of bodily excess. Examined as such, Wollstonecraft's landscape aesthetic goes some way towards explaining tensions in her interpretation of female self-governance,<sup>3</sup> or the problematic distinctions between passion and reason and body and spirit she feels are integral to woman's participation in educational, political and financial spheres.<sup>4</sup>

This first chapter will argue that in *A Short Residence*

Wollstonecraft's political and aesthetic demarcations between pure/impure, reason/passion and masculine/feminine<sup>5</sup> prevent her from reading intimacy, sympathy or delight she otherwise might into the natural scenes. I will suggest that this is because these categories are informed by a fear of defilement: filth which is ritually promoted through religious purification rites and which is prohibited through the act of separating or symbolizing the threat of the feminine to the subject.<sup>6</sup> However, establishing a dialectic between moments in Wollstonecraft's text when feminized nature threatens one's "own and clean self"<sup>7</sup> and Kristeva's claim that the divided categories (sin/beauty, pure/impure) are "gathered in a single move perversion and beauty as the lining and the cloth of one and the same economy", I will suggest that Wollstonecraft's narrative movement from the abject<sup>8</sup> to sublime wholeness and beauty (from physicality to spiritual love) both blurs and is made possible by the boundaries of these dichotomous terms. While not denying that Wollstonecraft's account of woman's position at the boundary between nature and culture leaves some structures of woman's subordination intact, I suggest that she must imagine physical desire in *A Short Residence* as a movement from the lures of the abject to the unity of the sublime, in order to translate or make visible the abjected "body" of woman/nature.

In certain passages of *A Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft's melancholy inspires strong identification with picturesque,<sup>9</sup> beautiful or sublime scenes, making it impossible for her to maintain enough distance from perceived objects to be able to regard them as completely other from her self. Yet her literary interpretation of this empathy,

paradoxically, suggests her irreparable displacement from both the natural world she longs to merge with and from the society she values. Sailing from Helgeroa, for example, she observes the picturesque "rocks and islands" and, in her loneliness, she likens herself to their trees, which "brave" the hostile northern "elements": "Sitting then, in a little boat on the ocean, amidst strangers, with sorrow and care pressing hard on me,--buffeting me about from clime to clime,--I felt 'Like the lone shrub at random cast, / That sighs and trembles at each blast!'"(126) This pathetic fallacy resists prolonged symbolic representation and falls short of Wollstonecraft's more formally managed, contemplative descriptions of picturesque scenes elsewhere in her text. The landscape is merely desolate and inhospitable, and the narrator's fate seems as arbitrary as that of the most vulnerable and insensible of flora and fauna: she is a mere "shrub" among great "pines and firs", even more displaced and forlorn than the piteous little "foxes and hares" who haphazardly find "retreat" among the barren rocks. Neither a philosophic transcendence into an imaginative or sublime domain nor an innocent integration into the cycles of nature is possible in this passage because Wollstonecraft employs a sentimental literariness to explain the beguiling harmony she feels with the natural environment.

Though there are few passages in *A Short Residence* in which the narrator attempts to express such an absolute and debillitating interconnectedness with observed nature, this emotional and narrative impasse illustrates Wollstonecraft's straddling of the border between nature and culture. If a woman attempts to speak through or within nature, as Wollstonecraft does in the Helgeroa passage, she risks

silencing herself. For traditional philosophical, political and aesthetic conventions symbolically link women with both static, consumable feminine landscapes and with bestial natural forces which threaten civilization. As Karen Hust argues, Wollstonecraft realizes that both motifs, woman as passive, inarticulate landscape and woman as threatening other, naturalize her exclusion from rational discourse and justify the "chastening and possessive hand" which shapes "her" unruliness; therefore, for a woman to "identify herself with nature, . . . would be to abdicate rather than gain power, to lose rather than to find her voice."<sup>10</sup>

Wollstonecraft may refuse to merge with nature, whether to affirm some "feminine" instinctual and harmonious identity with the natural world or to achieve some delusive sense of a more authentic self, yet as a woman she also recognizes that nature problematically permits a bewitching and sensual empathy with that which is subordinated by the gaze and is too tempestuous or too transient to aid human happiness. She reads "femininity" into the "charms" of the countryside surrounding of Tonsberg, for these "elysian scenes" wear "a face of joy" and evoke feelings of domesticity, "peace and plenty"(135). But finding her own standards of "virtue and principle" are, at best, "illusive"(135) in a world of "languid sympathies"(136), she has cause to lament, "Why has nature so many charms for me--calling forth and cherishing refined sentiments, only to wound the breast that fosters them?"(135) In *A Short Residence* this "solitary feeling"(136) consequently produces an apprehensive regard for "mother" nature as a source of artistic inspiration, praised as "she" initially is here and as she often is in

Wollstonecraft's texts.<sup>11</sup> For the equivocal status of the maternal in traditional representations characterizes Wollstonecraft's anxieties about countenancing libertinism through her own specularization. As a traditional symbol of nature, a benevolent female (wife, mother, servant) often signifies passive femininity: unsullied, placid and decorative, seeming to exist in order to sooth the artist's world-weary vision and creative anxieties, or to rouse his passion. Nature is a nurse or a mother in Wordsworth's poetry, forming the *mise en scene* for the poet's dialogue and guaranteeing him an influx of power. Paradoxically, this figure is also the mother of natural disorder and chaos, a symbol for hideous sublimity which exists beyond the boundaries of civilization. In Gray's "Progress of Poetry", for example, she is the "mighty Mother" who "unveils" her "aweful face" and relinquishes her "keys" of sublime "Horreur" and "thrilling Fears"(92-3) to the poet. Wollstonecraft speaks of this sublime, terrible mother when she describes the Swedish coast: "Approaching the frontiers, consequently the sea, nature resumed an aspect ruder and ruder, or rather seemed the bones of the world waiting to be clothed with every thing necessary to give life and beauty"(88). Benign or terrible, sensual or desolate, this metaphor demands a God-like creator: a child-genius (Shakespeare in the Gray poem) or a Wordsworthian poet-patriarch to "clothe", subdue, transform and appropriate the liminal power of "rude" creation. And, for Wollstonecraft, such a stance is out of the question, because, for her, nature "excites responsive sympathy"(99).

Although Wollstonecraft's belief in the perfectibility of human

nature inspires *A Short Residence's* topos of a "golden age"(66), or an ideal state of existence in a progressive future society, she rejects a nostalgic myth of restoration or re-Creation. She knows in such a "natural", masculinist prelapsarian world woman is a Miltonic Eve: lovely, fertile and compliant, like Eden's more valuable beasts and fruit trees. A poetic recreation of what she refers to as "Rousseau's golden age of stupidity" would privilege her society's creation of childlike or animalistic women.<sup>12</sup>

If Wollstonecraft resists this absorption into the natural landscape, her other option is to create an object-relation to nature, or an emotional and metaphorical suturing that turns nature into a support for the self's creative desire. This state of metaphoric detachment and domination is, however, problematized by the historically and theoretically masculine prerogative of the gaze.<sup>13</sup> For in eighteenth-century aesthetics artists' viewing experiences typically involve forceful pictorial or even dramatic renderings of perceptual dominance over seductive or chaste, unruly or passive, free or constrained, maidenly or matronly nature. As John Berger remarks on the "experience of taking possession" in European art of the period, "Just as its perspective gathers all that is extended to render it to the individual eye, so its means of representation render all that is depicted into the hands of the individual owner-spectator."<sup>14</sup>

Narrative progression would, of course, be impossible if Wollstonecraft were not such an observing, objectifying figure, the "maker of meaning"<sup>15</sup> in her text; yet the imperative to create meaning in her cultural and historical context often determines woman's position

as object of representation, or as telos for the appropriating eye of an "owner-spectator." Therefore, for Wollstonecraft to distance herself from perceived nature, to frame it and to appropriate its power,<sup>16</sup> is for her to assert dominance over a nature seen as eternally feminine; and this amounts to a reiteration of her own cultural position as object of another's look.

This detached, purely aesthetic approach to natural objects is further problematized in *A Short Residence* by a link between the gaze and issues of desire and power, or, more explicitly, sensual pleasures which Wollstonecraft associates with the irrationality and vanity imposed on woman by selfish gallantry and fear of female intellect. For example, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she contests the pleasurable and weak "beauty" of Burkean aesthetics and Rousseau's *Emile*, which urge women to collude with the spectators' gaze and so consent to their own objectification: "Your BEST, your SWEETEST empire is--to PLEASE", urged Anna Letitia Barbauld in "To a Lady with Some Painted Flowers", a poem that Wollstonecraft dismisses, as an instance of a woman "of superior sense", sadly, mimicking a "language of men" which "robs the whole sex of its dignity", by "classing" women with the "smiling flowers that only adorn the land."<sup>17</sup> Wollstonecraft believes that seemingly innocent "fanciful theories"---nostalgic, pastoral metaphors--are merely thinly-veiled tactics to naturalize woman's intellectual dependence on and sensual gratification of men: "man, ever placed between her and reason, she is always represented as only created to see through a gross medium, and to take things on trust"(82). It follows that this "gross medium" persuades women to identify with and mirror the erotic

and static image through which the spectator/ rake lives out his fantasies, libertine pleasures associated in Wollstonecraft's mind with a luxurious and modish "taste for rural scenes":

The same sensibility, or quickness of senses, which makes man relish the tranquil scenes of nature, when sensation, rather than reason, imparts delight, frequently makes a libertine of him, leading him to prefer the sensual tumult of love . . . to the calm pleasures of affectionate friendship.<sup>18</sup>

To countenance a sensual or maternal nature in her own writings would be for Wollstonecraft to mirror back to man his subjectivity, to become the foundation of and the justification for his desire.

There is little indication in *A Short Residence* that Wollstonecraft (as a "woman, coming alone"[96]) feels herself the object of erotic scrutiny. She observes sympathetic reactions to her "peculiar delicacy" and "solitariness"(113) but tends to play down her presumed frailties as an unescorted woman traveller, instead emphasizing the healing powers of physical and mental exertion and woman's potential for activity beyond the domestic sphere. Preparing to travel the narrows of the Skagerrak, for example, she describes her discomfort and "grotesque . . . appearance", crammed as she is into a "rude sort of *cabriole*" with a drunken "whip"-happy driver and an assortment of sailors. As undignified as she feels, she deflects the gaze of a "gentleman-like" onlooker by meeting his eyes to "allow"(98) him to laugh with her in a moment of shared irony. This recuperative gesture is a marked contrast to the vulnerable female spectacle in, for example, Frances Burney's *The Wanderer* and Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray* (1804) where roaming heroines are tormented by erotic and censorious "looks".

Philosophical and picturesque travel conventions may preclude admission of one's own physical affectivity, but as I have suggested, desire in such writings is invariably and often quite permissively projected on to the feminized "body" of nature. Wollstonecraft's landscape aesthetic is unusual in this respect, for it neither confines poetic authority to a private realm of desire nor guarantees an affirmative intimacy and inclusiveness, which critics have recently claimed as the privilege of women landscape artists. Granted, the external "body" of nature in *A Short Residence* is a site for woman's moral agency and her self-esteem and for reciprocal love relationships, thematic preoccupations in Wollstonecraft's life and works which broach the possibility of woman's self-governance. But, by the same token, these themes pit the conceptual terms reason and passion, body and spirit and masculine and feminine against one another, often denying woman expression of desires appropriate to herself and obstructing feelings of delight and connection which Wollstonecraft might otherwise see implied in natural scenes.<sup>19</sup> Such binaries may counterbalance philosophical and aesthetic associations between woman and a dangerous sensuality, but, as Catriona Mackenzie points out, the "supposedly sex-neutral" and reasonable "self" that controls the body in Wollstonecraft's political discourse is "implicitly associated with 'masculine' virtues"; and, "although virtue must be regarded as the same in both sexes, men and women have different 'duties'"(37) in the private and the public spheres, linked to femininity and masculinity, respectively.

The tensions in Wollstonecraft's account of woman's moral agency are most conspicuous in *A Short Residence* when the "dangers" of the

"voluptuousness of nature"(82) and the "pleasures of the senses" (76) appear on and disappear from the feminized body of nature. For example, Richard Holmes refers to a passage in Letter three as a "charming little essay" on the virtues of English cottage gardens. If reread with the word "woman" substituted for "garden", however, the passage reveals much about Wollstonecraft's formula for companionate marriage, as an alternative to the sensualist's gaze and woman's parasitical vanity:

[Formal gardens] may amuse the eye; yet they are not *home walks* to which the owner can retire to enjoy air and solitude . . . To speak explicitly, the usefulness of a garden ought to be conspicuous, because it ought not to be planted for the season when nature wantons in her prime; for the whole country is then a garden--far sweeter.(80)

The notion that both women and gardens are judged for their abilities to please the masculine eye and stir the libertine imagination forms the conceptual centre of what would otherwise be a conventional rehashing of popular tastes for more rustic and indigenous landscapes, as opposed to earlier, more formal garden designs. The conventional motif of wild nature or the country garden as a "wanton", coy and bountiful maiden in the works of Wollstonecraft's contemporaries has been read as a sublimated desire to become "her" "owner" and to prune "her" unfettered dales and groves.<sup>20</sup> Here, however, Wollstonecraft suggests that nature's unrestrained beauty is "far sweeter" than the contorted "accommodations and ornaments" of poets' and painters' "great gardens and pleasure grounds". Wollstonecraft's passage is tinged with her usual emphasis on the transience of masculine desire, and it

metaphorically echoes her contention in *Vindication*, that the "superficial accomplishments" and "artificial graces", imposed on women by the tyranny of the gaze, are similarly transient because they "raise emotion instead of inspiring respect".<sup>21</sup>

As inimical as this passage is to conventional amorous troping (a mixture of titillating feminine bondage and abandonment and a tension between erotic chase and moralizing containment), it suggests woman's body is an obstacle to her moral agency because it is dependent upon masculine approval. The suggestion that a woman/garden should demonstrate "usefulness" (such as maternal virtue) to inspire her husband/owner to return to his "home walks" in fall and winter when she is no longer "in her prime" sustains Wollstonecraft's ideal of woman's equal, rational citizenship, albeit one that confines her to a domestic sphere and insinuates that her prerogative is to "raise" respect. Wollstonecraft similarly claims on the first page of *Vindication* that women are "like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil," for their "strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and . . . after having pleased a fastidious eye, [they] fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought"(7). Furthermore, this excerpt in *A Short Residence* problematically pits reason and self-governance against excessive passions associated with the female body. For sensible women (and English gardeners) must acknowledge that there is a "whole country" of short-lived sensual tyrants--novel and lushly blooming beauties--available to gratify the husband/owner's sensual appetites; thus, the "art of embellishing" the woman/garden "consists in interesting, not in astonishing"(146).

By contrast, other landscape descriptions in *A Short Residence* openly challenge popular metaphors which eighteenth-century philosophy and aesthetics used to construe female sexuality. Often such tropes preclude both the subordination and appropriation of nature's difference for the sake of a personal influx of power and the female subject's absorption into a weak or carnal nature. Here again, however, Wollstonecraft's figurative language problematically augments hierarchical distinctions between body and passion as feminine, and spirit and reason as masculine. In Letter nine, for example, she takes an alternative approach to the personification of the pine and fir groves she passes in Norway, by challenging a popular elision between women and carnal nymphs:<sup>22</sup>

Time had given a greyish cast to their ever-green foliage; and they stood, like sires of the forest . . . I had not seen so many oaks together in Norway, as in these woods, nor such large aspens as here were agitated by the breeze, rendering the wind audible--nay musical . . . In the winter, these august pines, towering above the snow, must relieve the eye beyond measure, and give life to the white waste.(118)

Unlike the garden passage in Letter three, this excerpt refuses the kind of forceful intimacy which contemporary landscape artists suggest with their coy, seductive nymph/nature. Initially, Wollstonecraft's description deploys conventional lexis for the picturesque ("agitated", "re-animated", "greyish-cast", "melody", "shade", "soothing melancholy"), a variety and intricacy which she prefers to the uniformity of winter's "white waste" and the fatiguing "continual recurrence" of trees along the roadside in the daylight. Traditionally the gratification which an

artist or traveller seeks in the roughness, sudden variation and partial concealment of picturesque scenes is articulated through sexual analogy, as an assertion of one's right to roam freely over and to uncover nature's secrets. For example, Uvedale Price writes of nature as a coquette, claiming "all deep coves, hollows, and fissures . . . invite the eye to penetrate into their recesses, yet keep its curiosity alive, and unsatisfied".<sup>23</sup> The window of Wollstonecraft's carriage conveniently forms a potential frame for this kind of landscape, a substitute for the Claude glasses that picturesque travellers peered through, in order to transform promiscuous nature into a manageable possession, and to create perceptual and figurative boundaries between self and the viewed other.<sup>24</sup>

However, rather than paying "homage" to a feminine nature from within the "architecture of a building" or the confines of a vehicle, Wollstonecraft favours a more direct imaginative and material participation in the natural scenes. She clearly states a preference for walking in the "avenue" of "aged pines", because their rustling, "fresh odour" and soothing shade offer a sensual contrast to a view from the *camera obscura*<sup>25</sup> of her carriage window, and to the artificial frames of "dusty hangings" and "worm-eaten pictures"(118) in the home of a Norwegian nobleman. Yet Wollstonecraft's wariness of conventional maternal and *femme fatale* personifications (her need to assert reason's control over unruliness associated with the feminine) also insists on the impossibility of her wish to merge with nature. She underscores her departure from traditional metaphors, claiming, "I have been struck with a mystic kind of reverence, and I did, as it were, homage to their

venerable shadows. Not nymphs, but philosophers, seemed to inhabit them--ever musing"(119). Effectively, this decentering of the seductive maiden motif destabilizes (if momentarily and half in jest) her certainty that she is alone the subject of the gaze, for, oddly enough, the masculine subjects--the "sires of the forest"--must look back at her: "I could scarcely conceive that they were without some consciousness of existence--without a calm enjoyment of the pleasure they diffused."(119) A playful conjecture that she is observing contemplative entities confirms her role as thinking spectator, by reflecting her own inquisitive, "musing" glance back at her. Figuratively looked at by the gaze of her own creation,<sup>26</sup> Wollstonecraft must acknowledge that she is constructing a dialogic process, involving an audience and shaping a text from a position of retrospect: "In solitude, the imagination bodies forth its conceptions unrestrained, and stops enraptured to adore the beings of its own creation. These are moments of bliss; and the memory recalls them with delight"(119). Effectively her alternative "masculine" object-relation to the pine and fir groves forces her to acknowledge that she is a spectator and an interpreter of natural scenes rather than a participant in them. And, as the poetic diction of "mystic kind of reverence" and "venerable shadows" suggests, she is alienated from the natural scene, at least in terms of partaking in nature's positive and empowering materiality.<sup>27</sup>

Thus Wollstonecraft's longing to dissolve barriers between herself and an idealized natural realm is frustrated by her superior literary consciousness' regulation of the sensual and transcendence of the natural, recognised at the end of Letter nine as an oscillation between

the "wilderness" and the "polished circles of the world": "recollecting [society's] vices and follies, I bury myself in the woods, but find it necessary to emerge again, that I may not lose sight of the wisdom and virtue which exalts my nature"(122). On the one hand, the threat surrounding the overlapping categories--woman/desire/nature/culture-- in Wollstonecraft's text is articulated as a libertine system which is hostile to woman's participation in a cultural realm and which the enterprising aesthetician sublimates through a careful demarcation of the "glimmerings of mind" from the "rude materials of creation" and "unwrought space"(65), the latter categories implicitly associated with the feminine. On the other hand, Wollstonecraft recasts conventional tropes without abandoning their erotic metaphoric vehicles, and the landscape seems to initiate feelings of necessity or even desire which blur the very boundaries (between reason and passion, body and spirit and masculine and feminine) on which her concept of woman's self-governance depends. In both instances, however, Wollstonecraft circumvents or sustains popular landscape descriptions by maintaining the object status of the feminine, whether as an object of compassion or revulsion.

To ascertain whether Wollstonecraft's dual approach to nature stems from more than her fear of aesthetic conventions used against women in a patriarchal culture, I would like to draw on Julia Kristeva's cross-cultural distinctions between purity and pollution, or "exclusory prohibition": religious and artistic catharses that create "boundaries" between "society and a certain nature as well as within the social aggregate on the basis of the simple logic of excluding filth"(65). I

suggest that, at the most rudimentary level, Wollstonecraft's problematic demarcations and her dependence on the object-status of the feminine should be read not so much as a susceptibility to essentialist views of woman's body as it should be linked to defilement or the ritual prohibition of purifying the abject. Arguably, desire for transcendence over natural contagion is present in many of Wollstonecraft's texts, but it is more fully developed in her travel narrative's treatment of unfamiliar systems of classifying and excluding defiling elements. Unfamiliar customs, from drinking a criminal's blood for apoplexy(169) to the Norwegian practice of mummification(108) and dressing children in "noxious" and "unwholesome"(82) flannels, are branded "horrible violation[s] of nature"(169) and elicit such strong expressions of fascination and disgust as to suggest a fear of defilement. Arguably, many passages in her narrative are shaped by a sickening erasure of differences or a threat to "identity, system, order"(4) which converges on domestic, economic and bodily imbalance: lavish maternal affections, indiscriminate hospitality, spendthrift economies and wanton emotions and sexuality, all linked to human interaction with and in what she terms a "half-civilized" society.

Like Wollstonecraft's evolutionary view of society, Kristeva's literary and religious analyses insist that abjection is subdued only when the "feminine"<sup>28</sup> is removed from discourse. Kristeva observes that the feminine "does not succeed in differentiating itself as other but threatens one's own and clean self, which is the underpinning of any organization constituted by exclusions and boundaries", such as Wollstonecraft's need to separate the sexes or pit self-governance,

virtue and reason against passions of the body. These oppositions not only amount to "giving men rights over women", but they also insist, as Kristeva puts it, that the "feminine, becomes synonymous with radical evil that is to be suppressed"(70). Psychoanalytically, "matrilineal or related filiation, endogamy, decisive role of procreation for the survival of the social group"(64) all point to woman's being coded as abject, because the threat which must be removed is the archaic relation to the pre-object of need: the mother. Notwithstanding difficulties some contemporary feminists have with this prediscursive relationship to the maternal body,<sup>29</sup> anthropological studies suggest a link between woman's trans-cultural devaluation and her place in the economy of abjection. Sherry Ortner sums up the anthropological view of prohibition in her influential essay "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture",<sup>30</sup> claiming that woman is seen as less transcendent of nature, because her social role prevents her from creating cultural symbols and artifacts (including a self-conscious use of language) which ward off a dangerous collapse of boundary between the self and certain defiling agents which *come to be associated* with the feminine.

Both anthropological and psychoanalytic, Kristeva's study does not offer an easy framework in which to place Wollstonecraft's abjection of the close proximity of (feminine) nature and culture. Yet Wollstonecraft's narrative struggle to displace or "dam up" behavioural imbalance, including excessive sensuality, is perhaps best examined in the context of Kristeva's analysis of the dualism of Christian sin, one of the cultural codings abjection assumes and one of the cultural means by which Wollstonecraft's exigent categories, body and reason, masculine

and feminine and pure and impure, are "gathered in a single move . . . as the lining and the cloth of one and the same economy."<sup>31</sup>

Wollstonecraft's republicanism normally prevents study of the religious motivations of her literary texts, and it is not my intention to extract her religious beliefs from her travel writing.<sup>32</sup> Yet I contend that her suspicion of a sensual or maternal nature which, nevertheless, depends upon the significance of the object status of the feminine is illuminated by certain Christian precepts as interpreted by Kristeva as the concept of sin as the reverse side of beauty,<sup>33</sup> and the sublime as the writing or speaking subject's encounter with his or her fear of impurity.

Locating Christ's sublimity in the "osmosis . . . between the spiritual and the substantial, the corporeal and the signifying", Kristeva claims that sin is the "rock where one endures the human condition as separate: body and spirit, body jettisoned from the spirit; as a condition that is impossible, irreconcilable"(120). Sin may be tied to the language of "debt and iniquity", a Levitical split between the spirit and an "overflowing, a profusion, even an unquenchable desire" which converges on the body, usually as hunger or woman's flesh. When Wollstonecraft encounters excess ("an overwhelming release of drives, unrestrained by the symbolic"[124]) she voices an accusatory, retributive condemnation of "animal spirits"(136), sexual amours, consumption of alcohol and ravenous appetites. Confronted with an accusatory language of morality and knowledge ("imagination", "understanding", "judgement" and "taste"(73), in Wollstonecraft's words) compelling one to "adopt a behaviour and speech of . . . self-control under the ruthless gaze of the Other"(122), this excess remains safely

outside of her proper self as abomination or impurity or as threatening otherness which is able to disturb identity or order but, all the same, is "always nameable, always totalizable"(17). It is this "exclusory prohibition" which enforces boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, flesh and spirit, and which allows Wollstonecraft to declare with Old Testament indignation, "Without the aid of imagination all the pleasures of the senses must sink into grossness . . . [I]t was to this weariness, I suppose, that Solomon alluded when he declared that there was nothing new under the sun!--nothing for the common sensations excited by the senses"(72-3).

Nonetheless, it is only through representations of nature which acknowledge what Kristeva terms "heterogeneous conceptions of the flesh"(124) that Wollstonecraft can control the "daemonic" potential of the feminine. For language cannot ward off abjection or perversity by metaphorically subduing the body (as "an eager drive confronted with the law's harshness"[124]). Rather, Wollstonecraft's text employs "two modalities" of flesh which the New Testament makes inseparable in order to account for sin and its absolution: "on the one hand, close to Hebraic flesh (basar), [Christian theology and, indeed, art] point to the "body" as eager drive confronted with the law's harshness; on the other, [they] point to a subdued "body", a body that is pneumatic since it is spiritual, completely submersed into (divine) speech in order to become beauty and love"(124). For instance, Wollstonecraft's description of the scene which awaits her when she reaches Kvistram (she uses words like "infernal", "noise, riot", "confusion", "howl", "weep", "brute", "stench", "effluvia", "pigstye"[156-57]) conforms to Kristeva's criteria for the

"demoniacal dimension of the pagan world"(123) or the object seen as "carnal overflow"(124) which narrative must subdue. Looking on helplessly as a group of men and women tear branches from "lofty trees" in order to build a fire for their evening of revelry, Wollstonecraft laments that this is just one more "rude tumult of the senses" that can only "end in a gross debauch":

They were drinking and smoking and laughing, with  
all their might and main. I felt for the trees  
whose torn branches strewed the ground.--hapless  
nymphs! thy haunts I fear were polluted by many  
an unhallowed flame; the casual burst of the  
moment.(156)

Wollstonecraft associates intemperance with the straining of domestic ties and masculine abuse of power, and here its potential tyranny is imaged as an infernal gang rape. Her impetuous dashes elide the pretty and benign nymphs with their "haunts": the trees are stripped and "polluted" next to a demonic fire, their protective branches impetuously cast on the ground with brute force. The derobing of a virginal nature is, of course, a conventional trope. Wollstonecraft, however, finds it a repellent enough assertion of a natural right of ownership in much of the period's poetry and prose, that she subverts its erotic, virile *raison d'être*, by recasting it as an odious and "denaturalizing" encroachment. Her "nymphs" are irreproachable and, consequently, resist a conventional elision between tyrannical, carnal women and nature, usually articulated in terms of easy navigation, justifiable visual penetration and despotic consumption.

Just the same, however, it is by demonstrating the close proximity of sin and beauty, holiness and unholiness and, in effect, by turning

the feminine into a (suffering) object of contemplation that Wollstonecraft is able to acknowledge and absorb the abject in this passage. To project her own mood or psychic processes onto trees through sustained symbolization, she must reiterate the pictorial suggestiveness of nature's personification as a fantasy maiden: child and woman, innocent and sensual, indigenous and artful. The otherworldly (in)corporeality, beauty and passivity of these "feminine" bodies offer her a way out of a frightening, displacing, exaggerating excess which, in this letter, converges on the perceived threat of feminine sexual transgression: women, such as the gruesome "apparitions" at Kvistram, who are lewdly indistinguishable from men(157) and whose "love" consists merely of sexual "appetite"(157). Though there are many excesses in Kvistram, they resolve into the same point of contention in Wollstonecraft's mind: "I do not now wonder that the girls lose their fine complexions at such an early age, or that love here is merely an appetite, to fulfil the main design of nature, never enlivened by either affection or sentiment"(157). Nonetheless, the reversal, in which disgust becomes jouissance and sin becomes beauty, is "driven home" as Wollstonecraft leaves Kvistram, reassuring herself of the safely integrative, communicable and intimate qualities of the picturesque. The "uncommonly serene" sight of "preparations for Sunday" and the "sweetest picture"(158) of a family returning home from haying "beguile"(157) her away from her initial loathing. Wollstonecraft has edged dangerously close to abjection, but the sublimation of a feminine nature has allowed the reader to glimpse a body which is at once "perverse" in its challenge to order, and "beautiful" in its reassertion

of a "state of fullness, of plenty"(123).

This assimilation or submersion, which recurs in *A Short Residence* as the disturbing proximity of purity (order and beauty) and impurity (disorder and filth), is also where the sublime enters Wollstonecraft's narrative as a longing for satiation. For her frustrated desire to circumvent the split between self and (abjected) nature and her attempts to overcome her own physicality are cased in the language of transcendence. Take, for instance, what is perhaps Wollstonecraft's most unsettling confrontation with abjection in her travel narrative: her account of a visit to the "little recess full of coffins"(108) in St. Mary's church, Tonsberg. Despite her antipathy to the prevalent "desire of preserving the body"(108), she lingers in the little room where mummies "remain till the day of judgement"(109) in order to articulate ("name") her repulsion. Kristeva claims that the abject is, after all, a "summons" which "beseeches, worries and fascinates desire"(2). Intrigued, Wollstonecraft examines the "teeth, nails and skin"(109) of the embalmed corpses, repulsing them as defilement:

Ashes to ashes! thought I--Dust to dust!--If this be not dissolution, it is something worse than natural decay. It is treason against humanity, thus to lift up the awful veil which would fain hide its weakness. . . [N]othing is so ugly as the human form when . . . dried into stone, merely to preserve the most disgusting image of death . . . For the world I would not see a form I loved . . . so sacrilegiously handled!--Pugh! my stomach turns.(108-9)

Kristeva claims that a corpse is opposite to the spiritual and the symbolic. It is "lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming,

inseparable lining of human nature"(109). And, in Wollstonecraft's mind, the "human petrifications" in the Tonsberg church are even "worse than natural decay", because they are the eternal "marking"(109) of what Kristeva designates as the unbearable "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite"(4).

However, without making it explicit, this passage exploits what Kristeva delineates as the connection between abjection and a fascination with an "unnamable otherness"(58) which leads to the feminine. Although Wollstonecraft feels sickened by her inability to "guess" at the "names"(108) of the corpses or to find a cultural (historical or "monumental"(109)) site to "bury" this disquieting matter, they cause her to speculate, "Where goes this breath? this I so much alive? In what element will it mix, giving or receiving fresh energy"(109). The word "mix" is significant in the context of what is, in every other respect, an instance of abomination. Because the corpse is "waste, transitional matter, mixture" it represents a menace to the "place and law of the One"(94), and it must be subsumed by burial so as not to pollute the divine earth: "God's territory", as well as his "Word"(109). Wollstonecraft sees the display of the corpse as impurity and abomination. Yet, attempting to envision her own death, she imagines her "self", her "breath", her "energy" not only "mixing" with but also "energizing" and being "energized" by an unspecified corporeal or spiritual "element". Here her "breath" is a metonymic substitute for her animated body as well as her spirit. Thus Wollstonecraft abjects the pagan preservation of the body but links her own subjectivity to a power (maternal? natural?) which a series of separations, historically

rooted in the Christian religion as spirit/body, masculine/feminine, pure/impure--combat as "paganism and its maternal cults"(94): earth worshipped as Gaia, the great Mother and Goddess.<sup>34</sup>

Ultimately, however, Wollstonecraft has recourse to the sublime rather than "Mother Nature" in this passage, using it to overcome the split between culture as access to discourse and nature as defilement and impurity. If she expresses some archaic or primordial encounter with the feminine, it is one characterized by suspicion and even fear rather than interdependence and *jouissance*. For Wollstonecraft's spiritual bliss, her longing to dissolve the split between body and spirit, belong to the symbolic order of discourse. As Kristeva argues, in order for the abject to be recognized as such, it must be translated into the sublime and "sublimation . . . is nothing else than the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal . . . In the symptom, [unsettled subjectivity] the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The abject is edged with the sublime"(11).<sup>35</sup> Thus, despite what Kristeva terms the "utmost of abjection" (that is "death infecting life"[54]), Wollstonecraft manages to subsume the threat or to confine it "within symbolicity, within the spiritual, within (divine) law"(109), through mystical language. To alleviate her disgust with the bodies and her spiritual apprehensions she quips, "it will require some trouble to make them fit to appear in company of angels, without disgracing humanity" and, more sombrely, "God bless you! I feel a conviction that we have some perfectible principle in our present vestment, which will not be destroyed just as we begin to be sensible of improvement"(109). As well as asserting

moral authority, Wollstonecraft's language ("grandeur of the active principle", "exalts the mind", "our very soul expands", "fresh energy", "higher state of existence"[109]) suggests a sublime transport which strives to affirm a unity of subjectivity which the abject calls into question. Subsequently this same language allows Wollstonecraft to turn her own heterogeneous (desiring) body into a "subdued body, a body that is pneumatic"(124). She writes, "I care not what habit [my body] next puts on, sure that it will be wisely formed to suit a higher state of existence. Thinking of death makes us tenderly cling to our affections--with more than usual tenderness, I therefore assure you that I am your's"(109).

If we agree with Kristeva that the abject is controlled (in effect, "seen") when speech makes it resplendent, and that abjection signifies a lack in discourse (a "language that gives up"[11]), then Wollstonecraft's suspicion of a sensual or maternal nature which assumes the object status of the feminine is not a weakness in her argument for woman's self-governance. Rather, the paradoxical status of the female body in Wollstonecraft's text, traced on the disquieting and the subdued, the horrible and the beautiful "body" of nature, suggests the peril of a "feminine" absence. When the "body" of nature is subsumed in sublime representation it is pleasurable, reassuring, satiating. Conversely, when faced with the disordering body of nature, we are left with abjection, the flip side or "lining" of the sublime, the culturally excluded, "dammed" up, prohibited feminine "lack" in discourse. These two representations are mutually binding in *A Short Residence*, allowing Wollstonecraft's (culturally-coded) fear of the feminine to be seen but

also controlled.

A final passage will suggest how the economy of abjection bears on Wollstonecraft's own feelings of delight or intimacy with natural scenes, her audience and her absent lover. As she describes the sights near Tonsberg, her euphemistic phrases ("rapture", "animated", "beauteous feeling", "sympathy" and "sentiments") suggest that what is really at stake, though sublimated by something more than "feminine" delicacy, is a dangerous admission of her own physicality. She laments,

Nature is the nurse of sentiment,--the true source of taste;--yet what misery, as well as rapture, is produced by a quick perception of the beautiful and the sublime, when it is exercised in observing animated nature, when every beauteous feeling and emotion excites responsive sympathy, and the harmonized soul sinks into melancholy, or rises to ecstasy, just as the chords are touched, like the aeolian harp agitated by the changing wind.(99)

Here Wollstonecraft seeks a narrative way out of the lures of abjection: the exaggerating, displacing excesses of the "brimming flesh of [woman's] sin"(126). Initially she resorts to self-sustaining illusions in order to negotiate her way into a "masculine" aesthetic discourse. She employs Edmund Burke's sublime as a point of comparison for her own impetuous "warm heart", stressing, as Burke does, the eye's capacity to frame objects ("perception", "observing"[99], "views", "looks", "gazing"), create judgement and form "taste". And she contrasts her own "sentiments" with this detached shaping and deciphering of the external world (whether it be women, estates, or nature) for the sake of mastery or aesthetic control. It seems that Wollstonecraft prefers this "masculine" prerogative to her own perceptions, which she believes are too "animated" and dangerously alive to an unrestrained natural world.

As a woman living in a society of male primogeniture, sexual double standards and unjust social and legal dependence on husbands, brothers and fathers, she warns, she must maintain a distance from the "beautiful and sublime" observed other. For "quick perception" incites precarious and impassioned identification with nature. And by fostering this identification, one risks being acted upon by every "changing wind": in Wollstonecraft's case, her lover's desertion, her friend's death or the knowledge of her female child's uncertain future.

However, Wollstonecraft's desire for Gilbert Imlay, her anxiety for her daughter and, as I will argue, an unnameable longing for Fanny Blood, are included in her very sensual interaction with nature, eventually allowing her to privilege her own imaginative powers over the aesthetician's critical and proprietorial eye. It is her articulation of her own "look" or desire that presents a substantial challenge to accepted modes of visual dominance and suggests that her occasional distrust of sexual passion stems from a refusal to yield to masculinist scopophilic or consummatory fantasies. Her vision is an expansion towards others (and by implication the other) which signals the failure of narcissistic desire:

The grave has closed over a dear friend, a friend of my youth; still she is present with me, and I hear her soft voice warbling as I stray over the heath. Fate has separated me from another, the fire of whose eyes, tempered by infantine tenderness, still warms my breast; even when gazing on these tremendous cliffs, sublime emotions absorb my soul. And, smile not, if I add, that the rosy tint of morning reminds me of a suffusion, which will never more charm my senses, unless it reappears on the cheeks of my child.(100)

The blush ("suffusion") likely signifies Wollstonecraft's memory of her own desire, but, interestingly, the wording allows that she might be

recollecting a flush on Imlay's cheek, and the vision is then augmented in their daughter's "sweet blushes." It would seem that whether one is viewed or viewing ceases to matter in truly sublime and beautiful moments, when the action is reciprocal. Looking and feeling another look seem interchangeable, both are capable of producing this disruptive, painful blend of sublimity and beauty, and both are temporally and emotionally incapable of being owned or mastered.

This compelling personal dynamic is not, however, a straightforward transgression or collapse of boundaries between self and other, as is suggested by Wollstonecraft's characteristic blending of the sublime and the beautiful and her generous emotional and aesthetic expansion towards others (Imlay, her daughter or Fanny Blood). Rather it is a longing to dissolve a split between flesh and spirit, self and other which Kristeva describes as the language of sin, "overflowing" into the beautiful.<sup>36</sup> And this "overflow" or ambiguous mingling of love and sin sublimates a potentially disruptive desire, such as the "transient sensations" which Wollstonecraft struggles to subdue or render "permanent"(100) in her travel writing. Here, sickly, easeful Burkean beauty and, by implication, the willing fetish-object and the tyrannical eye are represented by Imlay's charming but "infantine" and "transient" look. Suggestively, he is pictured as a lover, gazing at her with "fire" in his "eyes". The perilous sublimity of "tremendous cliffs" signals something more than "a passion for an individual" or even "an affection for mankind" is endangered. As Wollstonecraft herself acknowledges, "how dangerous it is to foster these sentiments in such an imperfect state of existence; and how difficult to eradicate them"

when personal desire is the "unfolding of that love which embraces all that is great and beautiful"(99).

What Wollstonecraft puts her finger on in this passage is the fact that some encounters with nature are pleasurable only at the cost of a physical and psychic alienation, an alienation which nevertheless reveals the inadequacy of language when "symbolicity interferes" with "corporeality"(125). For though Fanny Blood is also an object of desire in Wollstonecraft's text, she occupies an ambiguous position as the anxiety-producing border between nature and culture,<sup>37</sup> a position which Wollstonecraft feels she must surround with a series of prohibitions. Although Wollstonecraft was always enamoured of her friend's physical beauty,<sup>38</sup> Fanny must be imagistically incorporated into the Tonsberg passage in terms of her voice: "The grave has closed over a dear friend, the friend of my youth; still she is present with me, and I hear her soft voice warbling as I stray over the heath"(100). This haunting, elusive stimulus refuses a visual frame or containment, and it is perhaps the most profound sensory experience Wollstonecraft can imagine.<sup>39</sup> Fanny Blood's presence is undeniably a destabilizing force. Nevertheless it must form a semiotic appendage (suggested by the inarticulate sound "warbling") to Wollstonecraft's visually-articulated relationship with lover/husband and daughter, so as not to disrupt the symbolic ties of culture and kinship. Wollstonecraft naturalizes the mother-father-child triad at the expense of a momentarily intelligible, unnamed desire for Blood, perhaps traced on the sensual, half-articulate landscape as the smell and touch of "a thousand nameless sweets" and a "salubrity"(99) in the breeze. Nevertheless the sublimation of her own

(abjected) desires allows Wollstonecraft to voice this fascination with an "unnameable otherness" and to point to an unsettled and unsettling longing which she believes will be communicated to her reader in a more perfect "state of existence", as a more open and "genuine"(100) imaginative act.

1. It is assumed that Wollstonecraft's relationships with Henry Fuseli and Gilbert Imlay made her examine the practical impediments to her ideal of a "nonsexual human essence". In "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Female Sexuality", *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984), Mary Poovey claims, "The frustrations behind the contradictions evident in *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, her strongest polemic, would be dispelled only when she found a way to allow the writer and the woman to speak with one voice"(81). In *Mary Wollstonecraft*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), Moira Ferguson and Janet Todd claim *A Short Residence* is the "golden mean"(91) between reason and sensibility. For a study of the unlikely similarities between the pro-chastity ideologies of Wollstonecraft and Hannah More see Mitzi Myers, "Reform or Ruin: 'A Revolution in Female manners'", *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 11 (1982): 199-216.

2. Eighteenth-century picturesque and sublime artists often enact perceptual dominance over a feminized nature, a sensual spectatorship which creates oppositions, such as "Same and Other" and masculine and feminine, and, consequently, sadism, struggle, authority and hierarchy. Voyeurism is commonly associated in film theory with masculine desire. In her famous essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey claims, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/ female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed". In contrast to such scopophilia, Mulvey claims, voyeurism "has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt, . . . asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness." *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) 14-26.

3. In her defense of self-governance, Wollstonecraft stresses the perfectibility of the soul, woman's capacity to reason and the importance of virtue, all of which must be founded on reason.

4. See Wollstonecraft's reference to a "reformation in female manners" in *Vindication* Chapter 3, p.45 (Poston edition). Wollstonecraft's view of woman's self-governance is problematic. Although virtue is to be cultivated by both men and women, Mary Poovey claims Wollstonecraft's suggestion is limited in its denial of sexuality and in its reluctance to consider women capable of taking the initiative for social reform: "Women are simply to wait for this revolution to be effected, for their dignity to be restored, for their reformation to be made necessary. The task is primarily men's, and it involves not confrontation but self." Poovey accounts for this disjunction between Wollstonecraft's moral discourse and her aesthetic fixation with bodily excess in the *Wrongs of Woman* as an incompatibility between her political arguments and the sentimental genre she employs. See "Mary Wollstonecraft: The Gender of Genres in Late Eighteenth-Century England." In response to Poovey, Gillian Brown argues that Wollstonecraft's retreat from sexuality is "fundamental to making a case for female subjectivity"(200). See "Anorexia, Humanism, and Feminism," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 5.1 (1991): 189-215. And, while

troubled by the hierarchical distinctions Wollstonecraft draws between soul and body, reason and passion and masculine and feminine, Catriona Mackenzie argues that Wollstonecraft is attempting to "articulate a more subtle view of self-governance, one that would not pit women's reason in opposition either to their bodies or to affectivity." in "Reason and Sensibility: The Ideal of Women's Self-Governance in the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft", *Hypatia* 8.4 (1993) 35-54.

5.I will stress, of course, that the terms "masculinity" and "femininity" are not essential, transhistorical qualities inherent in human beings. Historically Wollstonecraft approaches an already-gendered aesthetic with her own en-gendered history. Current opinion links the "female sublime" to a vision of nature which is integrative and inclusive rather than domineering and aggressively individualized, although I will suggest that this is not always the case.

6.Kristeva claims that the purification rite is "that essential ridge, which, prohibiting the filthy object, extracts it from the secular order and lines it at once with a sacred facet. Because it is excluded as a possible object, asserted to be a non-object of desire, abominated as abject, as abjection, filth becomes defilement and founds on the henceforth released side of the "self and clean" the order that is thus only (and therefore, always already) sacred"(65).

7.See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1969) 120. In her reading of Douglas' text, Kristeva claims that the mother's "being coded as 'abject' points to the considerable importance some societies attribute to women (matrilineal or related filiation, endogamy, decisive role of procreation for the survival of the social group, etc.)"(64).

8.The excess which threatens Wollstonecraft is simultaneously outside and inside, the uncivilized "it" and the interior longing or "impetuous tide"(110) which she attempts to quell.

9.In his penultimate essay in *On the Picturesque* Uvedale Price claims "that the two opposite qualities of roughness, and of sudden variation, joined to that of irregularity, are the most efficient causes of the picturesque." Between 1782 and 1792, Wollstonecraft reviewed William Gilpin's books on the picturesque for the *Analytical Review*. She owes much to eighteenth-century theories of picturesque landscape, for Romantic poets were sceptical of an emphasis on the powers of sight, rather than the association of ideas. Wordsworth labelled the picturesque "jargon", for its dependence on the most "despotic of our senses". Samuel Holt Monk cites a passage from "The Prelude", observing that "the votaries of the picturesque were nearer to the creation of an abstract aesthetic than Wordsworth ever came, and this was because to him the aesthetic of nature was primarily a first step to the state of ecstasy in which he felt a presence that disturbed with the joy of elevated thoughts":

Although a strong infection of the age,  
Was never much my habit, giving way  
To a comparison of scene with scene,

Bent overmuch on superficial things,  
 Pampering myself with meager novelties  
 Of colour and proportion, to the moods  
 Of time and season, to the moral power  
 The affection, and the spirit of the place,  
 Less sensible. (XI 105-121)

*The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII Century England* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1935) 230. As Wollstonecraft's text demonstrates, however, an appreciation of picturesque landscapes and a heightened awareness of the "colour and prop", "moral power", "affection" and the "spirit of the place" are not mutually exclusive.

10. Hust claims, "women have always straddled the boundary between nature and culture in Western society." She cites the "antifeminist judgments" of Rousseau, Burke and Gilpin as Wollstonecraft's intertexts for her notions of "feminine chaos" and a benign "Mother" nature. See "In Suspect Terrain: Mary Wollstonecraft Confronts Mother Nature in *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*", *Women's Studies* 25.5 (1996) 503. Margaret Homans challenges the silencing of woman/ nature in *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing*: U of Chicago P, 1986.

11. See the extensive references under the heading "children" in "Index to Volumes 1-7" of *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler. Also see, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct in the More Important Duties of Life* (London, 1787); *Original Stories from Real Life Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness* (London, 1788); and *The Female Reader; or, Miscellaneous Prose and Verse; Selected from the Best Writers, and Disposed under Proper Heads; for the Improvement of Young Women* (London, 1789).

12. A re-creation of a natural state of existence is a popular theme in eighteenth-century philosophy and aesthetics. See Richard Holmes, notes 33 and 71. For Wollstonecraft's commentary on Milton's Eve and masculine desire, see *Vindication*, p. 20, where she claims "Children, I grant, should be innocent; but when the epithet is applied to men or women, it is but a civil term for weakness." She recognizes that Rousseau's sentimental yearning to cancel out the ill effects of the Fall would keep women in a continual state of ignorance and guile and urges that women "must be permitted to turn to the fountain of light." In relation to landscape design see Carole Fabricant: "It need hardly be pointed out that man's position of dominance in the fallen world was rooted in his supremacy over all other created beings, including woman in the form of Eve. Perhaps it is this above all which explains the significance at the heart of the Augustan feminized landscape." 129 in "Binding and Dressing Nature's Loose Tresses", *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 8 (1979), 109-103.

13. In psychoanalytic terms, women threaten castration; therefore men build up the "physical beauty of the object", turning the figure of a woman "into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous." Mulvey, 58.

14. "Past Seen from a Possible Future," in *The Look of Things: Essays by John Berger*, ed. and intro. Nikos Strangos (New York: Viking, 1974) 215. Carole Fabricant compares eighteenth-century landscape descriptions to the "relationship between painter and model", for both are "rooted in the distinction between capturer and captured, definer and defined"(112). In terms of dramatic renderings of perceptual dominance Fabricant claims, "Nature was to 'perform' as if on stage for the benefit of spectators. Words such as scene, theatre, platform, and entertainment echo through contemporary writings"(115).

15. Mulvey 15.

16. Karen Hust claims, "The Male Romantics took the idea of female sexual power in nature and used it as an engine for their own poetic authority, staging a ventriloquism in which they borrow this power to speak for subjects" 495.

17. *Vindication*, 53.

18. "On Poetry", *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, vol. 7 11.

19. Karen Hust claims that Wollstonecraft "mocks her own need to interpret, ornament and embalm nature, ruefully suggesting that Fanny is the wiser", for the child does not have to "follow such a mental obstacle course to find meaning in the land"(493).

20. This is true of Augustan and late eighteenth-century descriptions. Carole Fabricant claims of Augustan poetry, "Both women and landscape were continually being judged for their ability to titillate the imagination and satisfy the senses while at the same time remaining within carefully prescribed moral, aesthetic, and territorial limits"(111). In later theories of the picturesque, particularly those of Uvedale Price and Richard Payne, Vivien Jones claims, "anxieties about private property and national identity are articulated in terms of voyeurism and sexual possession"(121). For the reactions of other female writers to these tropes see, William C. Snyder, "Mother Nature's other Natures: Landscape in Women's Writing, 1770-1830", *Women's Studies* 21 (1992): 143-162.

21. *Vindication* 35-5.

22. Contrast Wollstonecraft's trope with Richard Payne Knight's use of the "nymph" as a figure for the unsuitability of neo-classical design in English gardens in *The Landscape*: "For as the cunning nymph, with giddy care, / And wanton wiles, conceals her study'd air; / And in each acquired grace of fashion tries / To hide in nature's negligent disguise;

/ While with unseen design and cover'd art / She charms the sense and plays around the heart." For an earlier example see Pope's depiction of Windsor Forest: "Here waving Groves a chequer'd Scene display, / And part admit and part exclude the Day; / As some coy Nymph her Lover's warm Address / Nor quite indulges, nor can quite repress."(17-20) "Windsor Forest" *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One Volume Edition of the Twickenham Pope* ed. John Butt (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1968) 195.

22. *An Essay on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful*. "A New Edition" (London, 1796) Quoted in Jones 128.

24. See David Punter, "The Picturesque and the Sublime: two worldscapes", in *The Politics of the Picturesque*, 220-240. Punter claims the tourist "believes he can see the world more clearly by turning his back on it and manipulating the great forces of nature--time of day, the season, the weather--by the deployment of tinted glasses." 226

25. Carole Fabricant borrows this term from Pope's letter to Edward Blount, June 1725: "When you shut the Doors of this Grotto, it becomes on the instant, from a luminous Room, a *Camera obscura*: on the Walls of which all objects of the River, Hill Woods, and Boats, are forming a moving Picture in their visible Radiations"127. Compare Wollstonecraft's description in Letter nine with her view of the shipping of the Elbe in Letter 24. Although the scene is "noble", she feels physically and emotionally removed enough from perceived "tricks of trade" and "whirlpool of gain" to call the view a "moving picture". With a strangely neo-Platonic fear of false artistic copies, in "On Poetry", she complains that the nature poet typically "contracts the prospect, and, selecting the most picturesque part of his *camera*, the judgement is directed, and the whole force of the languid faculty turned towards the objects which first excited the most forcible emotions in the poet's heart; the reader consequently feels the enlivened description, though he was not able to receive a first impression from the operations of his own mind." *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, vol. 7.

26. In film theory, this is referred to as the "fourth look": "any articulation of images and looks which brings into play the position and activity of the viewer also destabilizes that position and puts it at risk." Wheeler Winston Dixon, *It Looks at You: The Returned Gaze of the Cinema*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995) 1.

27. Mary Poovey links this metaphorical language to Wollstonecraft's "insistence on semantic distinctions where substantial differences do not exist": "true sublimity", "real affections of life" etc. Poovey claims that "Wollstonecraft actually reveals only that her own ideals are insubstantial--figments, in fact, of the very romantic idealism they are meant to transcend." "Mary Wollstonecraft: The Gender of Genres in Late Eighteenth-Century England", *Novel* 15 (1982) 119.

28.As Kristeva points out, "The brimming flesh of sin belongs, of course, to both sexes; but its root and its basic representation is nothing other than feminine temptation". She claims that the "feminine," far from being a primeval essence, will be seen as an "other" without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity"(59).

29.As Judith Butler has pointed out, the opposition of the semiotic and the symbolic tends to naturalize the prediscursive maternal body, ignoring cultural organization of sexuality. Furthermore, as a strategy, the semiotic, paradoxically depends upon the stability of the symbolic order, because libidinal drives cannot be sustained within culture without leading to psychosis. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

30.Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?", *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1974) 67-87.

31.Kristeva claims that "abjection assumes specific shapes and different codings according to various 'symbolic systems'"(68), that is the prohibitions and conflicts of particular social groups. The variants she examines are defilement, food taboos and sin.

32.Despite Godwin's boast that "not one word of a religious cast fell from [Wollstonecraft's] lips" as she was dying, the perfectibility of the soul is a recurrent theme in her works and one which enables her to challenge Rousseau's denial of woman's equality on the premise that woman must be accountable for herself before God.

33.Kristeva claims that "Neither debt nor want, sin, as the reverse side of love, is a state of fullness, of plenty. In that sense, it turns around into living beauty. . . Such a conversion into jouissance and beauty goes beyond the retributive, legalistic tonality of sin as debt or iniquity"(123). Her psychological analysis links this sublimation or denial to a terror of an "unnameable otherness" which always leads to the feminine.

34.In other words, "the place and law of the One do not exist without either a series of separations that are oral, corporeal, or even more generally material, and in the last analysis relating to fusion with the mother"(94). And, "the priceless debt to great mother nature, from which the prohibition of Yahwistic speech separates us, is concealed in . . . pagan cults"(109).

35.Kristeva's concept of sublimity assumes transcendence ("shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things that I see, hear, or think") and a search for a wholeness or identity ("I stray in order to be"[12]).

36.Perhaps this is a narrative which subsumes or deflects woman's "fall" into sexuality in many of the seduction plots of eighteenth-century novels, including Wollstonecraft's story of Jemima in *The Wrongs of Woman* and her central character's adulterous desire in *Mary, A Fiction*. Jemima's story is an unsentimental account of sexual abuse, poverty, thieving and prostitution. However, there is something in her emotional response to Maria's situation and in their mutual anguish which suggests the "overflowing--of love or sin", an ambivalence Kristeva links to "sin as requisite for the beautiful"(122-23).

37.Wollstonecraft's sentimental first impression of Fanny Blood linked her to the feminine realm of children and domesticity, social roles which Sherry Ortner claims account for cross-cultural links between women and defiling nature(76-79). See Godwin's comparison of this encounter with Wherter's first view of Lotte, 210.

38.See Richard Holmes' note p. 283.

39.As Gerald Bruns argues, "The ear is exposed and vulnerable, at risk, whereas the eye tries to keep itself at a distance and frequently from view . . . The eye appropriates what it sees, but the ear is always expropriated, always being taken over by another . . . The ear gives the other access to us, allows it to enter us, occupy and obsess us . . . hearing means the loss of subjectivity and self-possession."  
 "Disappeared: Heidegger and Emancipation of Language," in *Languages of the Unsayable: the Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 127-28.

## Chapter two: Narrative and Community

Until now we have examined Wollstonecraft's use of the sublime in the broad sense of elevated language and emotion. Now, however, I would like to look exclusively at Wollstonecraft's employment of the Romantic or egotistical sublime, a literary mode which offered a difficult stance for any woman writing from a social position of obligatory dependence and selflessness.<sup>1</sup> As I have pointed out, political and psychological barriers prevent Wollstonecraft from seeking this kind of aesthetic control at the expense of woman and nature, a metaphorical ascendancy which is crucial for "masculine" construction of self in the Romantic sublime.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, however, I will argue that during moments of heightened awareness of self in nature in *A Short Residence*, the tension between Wollstonecraft's communal aspirations and her antisocial yearning to dissolve meaning allows for the potential psychic disorder but also for the empowerment of the Romantic sublime. Wollstonecraft's abjection of the destructive artifices of transcultural commercial speculation, her portrayal of herself as an alienated Romantic figure, and her thematic insistence on woman's access to the more sympathetic aspects of culture suggest a narrative discord which insists not only on the inadequacy of the Romantic sublime's narrative authority and patriarchal logic but also on her own position as both inside and outside of language. Her version of the Romantic sublime suggests what Kristeva terms an artistic "hollowing out" of meaning which nevertheless asserts the claims of her own sympathetic vision over the selfish eminence of the sublime imagination.

Although the sublime metaphor demands an elevation or a passing

over of self into a realm beyond human experience, Wollstonecraft assumes that a search for self-knowledge is also a public affair, a narrative integration of self into a larger community. Therefore, she is unwilling to distance herself from or to create an aggrandizement of her ego over sublime objects, because that would dissociate her social from her aesthetic conscience. This transcendence would amount to the callous contemplation without reference to utility or ethics which Wollstonecraft recognizes in the sublime tropes of her contemporaries, a pure aestheticism manifest in, for example, Immanuel Kant's argument for the disinterested contemplation of objects in *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790) and manifest in the lonely, self-assured and infinitely expanding "I am" of the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime. As Samuel Monk observes of the distinction between the emotions of taste and the emotions of pleasure at issue in sublime experience in the last decades of the eighteenth-century,

Pain, grief or habit can prevent the enjoyment of the aesthetic experience; critical analysis destroys the 'flow' of imagination that is its source. Men without this 'flow' (men without taste) are aware only of the useful, the agreeable, the fitting, or the convenient in objects; they are incapable of aesthetic perception, which has nothing to do with these practical relations. (149)

The link between "practical relations" of social utility or sympathy and the sublime metaphor is unstable in Wollstonecraft's pre-*Rights of Woman* texts. Responding to Kant in her aphoristic *Hints*, she first declares that she regrets "knowledge of the fine arts, is seldom subservient to the promotion of either religion or virtue", though the "cultivated mind . . . would not adore" the sublime in nature until "wisdom was

conspicuous as well as power, for [its] admiration must be founded on principle"(275). Later in the same text, however, she concedes that the "pleasure" one feels viewing an aesthetic object of "utility and grace" is "lasting, but is never great".<sup>3</sup> Only in *A Short Residence* is Wollstonecraft able to clarify her stance, recognizing as she does that "taste" is meaningless without social affections, just as individual empowerment (the mainstay of the Romantic sublime) is often inauspiciously linked to the "practical relations" of political and social inequities.

To a certain extent, the selfishness of the commercial classes over and against which Wollstonecraft defines her receptiveness to the "beauties of nature" reaches terrifyingly sublime proportions as her narrative progresses. In Wollstonecraft's mind there is even something in this "species of gambling"(143) called commerce that resembles the self-aggrandizing risks taken in the sublime: both exaggerate, consume, conflate and require detachment from and, paradoxically, a merger with "speculations" for the sake of "transport". Barbara Freeman labels such distancing techniques (Kant's "disinterested contemplation") of eighteenth-century aestheticians and poets "sublime speculation", observing that the primary meanings of the word "speculation" link the detached theorization of one who "speculates" with the "speculative" risks of the marketplace. Implicitly she suggests that, as with the risks of a traditionally masculinist mercantile world, the hazards of the sublime (both visual and psychic disturbances) are partially calculated and demand participants who are somewhat detached from perceived nature. For the spectator would find a chaotic or dangerous spectacle

(or business enterprise) unpleasurable, were it not for a knowledge of his own distanced safety from that which he claims unity with or control over.

Freeman's metaphor of commercial speculation is intended to demonstrate that risk-taking and disinterested theorization are somehow connected in the sublime experience; however, I would like to literalize the relationship between Wollstonecraft's contempt for commerce and her suggestion that sublime transport somehow conceals luxurious, indiscriminate (sexual as well as gustatory) implications. Intended to take one beyond the corporeal, the simultaneous detachment from and assimilation of sublime objects for the sake of dominance and ego-affirmation are inseparable in Wollstonecraft's mind from the very corporeal selfishness and the domestic and public tyranny of the commercial bourgeoisie. Conversely, her own social affections preclude an empowering and reassuring univocity that would reify the popular, dispassionate claim that it is not the "business" of the sublime or the "picturesque eye" to "consider matters of utility. It has nothing to do with the affairs of the plough, and the spade; but merely examines the face of nature as a beautiful object".<sup>4</sup>

The conceptual term "taste" which recurs in Wollstonecraft's analysis of the political and social economy of Scandinavia has two primary connotations: polite social interaction and knowledge of the arts and sciences applied both wisely and humanely. Both ideals retain their literal sensory implications of appetite and digestion, as Wollstonecraft attacks the cultural limitations of the commercial and more plebian segments of society. Before she left for the north, Wollstonecraft

explored the metaphorical or even allegorical potential of an "appetitive" commercial realm in a private letter to Gilbert Imlay. Assuming a position of emotional and intellectual supremacy, she links Imlay's roaming commercial spirit to his hurtful, voluptuous "tastes":

I shall always consider it as one of the most serious misfortunes of my life, that I did not meet you, before satiety had rendered your senses so fastidious . . . The common run of men, I know, with strong health and gross appetites, must have variety to banish *ennui*, because the imagination never lends its magic wand, to convert appetite into love . . . Ah! my friend you know not the ineffable delight, the exquisite pleasure, which arises from a unison of affection and desire. . . Yes; these are emotions, over which satiety has no power . . . These emotions, more or less strong, appear to me to be the distinctive characteristic of genius, the foundation of taste, and of that exquisite relish for the beauties of nature, of which the common herd of eaters, drinkers and *child-begetters*, certainly have no idea.<sup>5</sup>

Imlay was becoming too involved in commerce; and travelling through a commercial society she feels is "governed in a manner which bears hard on the poor, whilst narrowing the minds of the rich"(190), Wollstonecraft finds her empathetic sociological analysis, her notion of good "taste", at odds with this too-familiar, scheming self-indulgence.

Perhaps it is this sense of personal urgency--a disaffection with Imlay's selfish indulgence--which weighs on the sensory, cognitive and aesthetic connotations of the word "taste" in *A Short Residence*. For the thematic resonances of taste as balance, judgement and constancy suggest a fear of defilement and a frustration with the limits of the body which repulses an appetitive but also a "sterile" and "solitary"(131) commercial realm. Contrasting her own introspection to the "solitude of ignorance" which characterizes the emotional "bulwarks"

of a business mentality, Wollstonecraft insinuates that the Scandinavian traders are as uncivilized as the "wild ~~picturesque~~"(131) landscape they inhabit. And she objects this animalistic behaviour through distinctions between eating for nourishment and eating for dissolute pleasure and eating pure foods and eating contaminating food:

As the dinner advances, pardon me for taking up a few minutes to describe what, alas! has detained me two or three hours on the stretch, observing, dish after dish is changed, in endless rotation, and handed round with solemn pace to each guest . . . Prelude a luncheon--then a succession of fish, flesh and fowl for two hours; during which time the dessert, I was sorry for the strawberries and cream, rests on the table to be impregnated by the fumes of the viands. Coffee . . . does not preclude punch, ale, tea and cakes, raw salmon &c. A supper brings up the rear . . . A day of this kind you would imagine sufficient --but a to-morrow and a to-morrow--A never ending, still beginning feast(74)!

Wollstonecraft's language mirrors the ritualistic "mummery" of the feast, signifying a fear that the natural will pollute what Kristeva designates as the self's "clean and proper body", a differentiation or border which protects one from the defilement of the other. The widespread consumption of alcohol is an obvious point of contention in Wollstonecraft's text; less noticeable, however, is her recurrent complaint that foods are treated with too many "spices and sugar" and her wish to keep certain foods (such as pure "strawberries" and polluting "flesh") apart. This disgust is premised on the meal's unsociable decadence but also on her own beliefs about what constitutes "pure" and "impure", separations which are illuminated by Kristeva's observation that "food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories. A boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the non-human"(75). This is why Wollstonecraft

depicts the Scandinavian bourgeois tradition of an "endless-rotation" of "spirits", tobacco and "high-seasoned"(74) foods as a nauseous substitute for philosophic contemplations and healthy familial relations: "when neither literature nor public amusements furnish topics for conversation, a good dinner appears to be the only centre to rally round"(76); "The captains acquire a little superficial knowledge by travelling, which their indefatigable attention to the making of money prevents their digesting; and the fortune that they thus laboriously acquire, is spent . . . in shew and good living"(99).

If, as Wollstonecraft's food abjections suggest, the natural and organic threaten the social, then she describes her own simple meals in terms of social exchanges with hostesses, inn-keepers and other travellers.<sup>6</sup> But I suggest that whenever she desires a collapse of identity between self and other (nature, Imlay, her daughter) she interiorizes food-loathings as a longing to transcend, to reach "another state of existence"(141) or to dissolve or transgress boundaries. This correlation makes the most sense in the context of Kristeva's description of the Eucharist<sup>7</sup> as a "deathly drive to devour the other"(118): "By surreptitiously mingling the theme of 'devouring' with that of 'satiating,' [the Eucharist] is a way of taming cannibalism. It invites a removal of guilt from the archaic relation to the first pre-object (ab-ject) of need: the mother"(118). This primal "fantasy of devouring" comes into play when Wollstonecraft is tormented by her daughter's cries, stranded as they are on a ferry crossing the Great Belt for ten hours without food. Wollstonecraft's peculiar allusion to the dark tale of Count Ugolino cannibalizing his children who were imprisoned with him in the Tower of

Pisa re-enacts this satiating need to dissolve barriers between self and other, flesh and spirit, life and death:

[Fanny], at last, began to cry so bitterly for bread, that fancy conjured up before me the wretched Ugolino, with his famished children; and I, literally speaking, enveloped myself in sympathetic horrors, augmented by every tear my babe shed; from which I could not escape, till we landed, and a luncheon of bread, and a basin of milk, routed the spectres of fancy.(183)

Wollstonecraft's phrase "literally speaking" is intriguing, suggesting that the desire/ threat exists outside and inside, "enveloping" her as an item of clothing might but also materializing as unwelcome product of her own imagination. This fantasy of overcoming barriers is then underscored by the poignancy of her regret at parting from the people she meets on the ferry: "I then supped with my companions, with whom I was soon after to part for ever--always a melancholy death-like idea--a sort of separation of the soul; for all the regret which follows those from whom fate separates us, seems to be torn from ourselves"(183). Whereas impure nourishment suggests a painful awareness of the impediment of the body and an unrectifiable split between self and other which converges on an unsociable commercial "society", Wollstonecraft's simple "bread" and "milk" meals and her fantasies of devouring suggest a transformation of nature into culture and an amelioration of boundaries between self and other, body and spirit, life and death: a desire to move beyond which is a stimulus to the sublime experience.

Wollstonecraft traces this same tension between abjection and transcendence on the Scandinavian landscape. That is, if the "wildness", solitariness and self-indulgence of a commercial people does

not prevent her from initiating moments of sublime empowerment or transport. For her imagination links sublime scenes to the economic or social exploitation transpiring within Scandinavian coastal towns: estranged affections which would make for painful excursions into the unsocial or even solicit the interference of the primitive or impure with the human. For instance, the "huge, dark rocks"(65) of the Norwegian coastline initially signify the "sterile"(67) but magnificent *tabula rasa* of "rude creation"(65), or Burkean power, darkness, obscurity and privation. However, because the rocks harbour men of business who are "coldly immersed in their own affairs"(182), Wollstonecraft can not sustain a vocabulary of height and grandeur describing what seems to her an insulating wasteland, a physical barrier to the "introduction of the arts and sciences"(103) and to "finer moral feelings"(133). Instead, as her narrative progresses, the sublime rocks become a metaphor for her domestic unhappiness, the "tyranny of wealth"(150) and the impediments to her Revolutionary ideals: "I am forewarned that I shall find [people] still more cunning and fraudulent . . . for their towns are built on naked rocks"(125); "Talk not of bastilles! To be born here, was to be bastilled by nature"(131); "Nothing genial, in fact, appears around this place, or within the circle of its rocks"; "Such a contempt have they, in fact, for every species of fraud, . . . so much do they despise the arts for which those traders who live on the rocks are notorious"(149). And walking amongst the rocks near Helgeroa, she feels her "breath oppressed" and shudders as a train of mental associations trigger her memory of a similar "disgusting" atmosphere: being "stifled" by business men whose "smoking, drinking brandy, and driving

bargains" pollute the familial and social ("wives", "bed", "breath and teeth", "clothes and furniture"[132-3]). She attempts to clothe the barren landscape (a "sterile" sublimity) with the animate variety and intricacy of the picturesque. The closest she comes to the metaphor of transcendence, however, is to wish for "wings" to seek a "glimpse of smiling nature" and to "relieve" her "aching sight" with a "patch of green"(131), scenes which are conceivable only as a mingling of the sublime with the picturesque and/or the beautiful outside the "bastilled" commercial towns "built on naked rocks"(125).

Wollstonecraft links a commercial lifestyle and the pollution of the organic/impure which precludes poetic transport. But she also engages in a direct critique of the successful ascendancy of imagination and aesthetic excellence over an ethical domain. For example, although she admits in her analysis of the *mummies*

that the "contemplation of noble ruins produces a melancholy that exalts the mind"(109) (a feeling of commiseration and of historically-removed otherness), she resists an artistic sublimation of misery or Burke's infamous indulgence in a "strangely wicked" fascination with a great ruin, envisioned in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) as London's destruction by conflagration or earthquake. Observing the destruction of Copenhagen, Wollstonecraft notes,

There was little in the appearance of fallen bricks and stacks of chimneys to allure the imagination into soothing melancholy reveries; nothing to attract the eye of taste, but much to afflict the benevolent heart. The depredations of time have always something in them to employ the fancy, or lead to musing on subjects which, withdrawing the mind . . . seem to give it new

dignity: but here I was treading on live ashes.(163)

This passage exposes the misanthropic aestheticism of the "soothing" Burkean experience, dependent upon maintaining a certain distance from despair--"withdrawing the mind" as it were. Burke claims, "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modification, they may be, and they are delightful, as we everyday experience."<sup>8</sup> Wollstonecraft links this detachment from the social to the gutless "gambling" of the "speculating merchants" who refuse to risk fighting the fire on behalf of the community until "fear like an electrical shock [Burke's "danger"?], roused all the inhabitants to a sense of the general evil"(165). Yet these same "people of property" will endanger the "interests of nation . . . *sang froid*"(165) if their ventures bring personal advantage, though "sluggish concentration in themselves makes them so careful to preserve their property that they will not venture on any enterprise to increase it, in which there is a shadow of hazard"(165).

Arguably this passage is the impetus behind Wollstonecraft's giving Letter eighteen the sole title in *A Short Residence*, simply naming it "Copenhagen". It is a gloomy landmark in Wollstonecraft's narrative, not only expressing her severe disappointment in the capital city itself, but, I believe more profoundly, mourning what Kristeva terms the "paternal apex--the one that prohibits, separates, prevents contact" between mother and child and subsequently creates a loss in perfect communication. Re-examining Freud's thesis in *Totem and Taboo* of the murder of the father and the son's guilty restoration of paternal

authority through "the sacred, exogamy, and society"(56), Kristeva points to the "other side of religious phenomena"(57) that is "more secretive still and invisible, non-representable, oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity . . . toward the non-separation of the subject/object, on which language has no hold but one woven of fright and repulsion"(58). The aesthetic and political disappointments surrounding the circumstances of the <sup>Copenhagen</sup> Fire give Wollstonecraft cause to lament the way in which "societies code themselves" in order to compensate for this "other side" or "lining": "defensive and socializing" but also showing "fear and indifferention"(58). She observes this obsessional and paranoid structure in the instability of the Danish court, in the very "madness" of "killing" such an ideal stateswoman as Queen Caroline Matilda to preserve her husband, a "puppet of a monarch", a "notorious debauchee" and an "idiot into the bargain"(166): "What a farce is life! This effigy of majesty is allowed to burn down to the socket, whilst hapless Matilda was hurried into an untimely grave"(167). This image at the end of Letter eighteen of a candle scorching the very socket which holds it firm brings Wollstonecraft's analysis of the conflagration of the city of Copenhagen round full circle. The paternal authority so zealously preserved in Denmark is a treacherous "machine of state"; the king is an idiot and the prince royal (slow to react to the fire) a "puerile"(164) ruler. Both are sustained by other "weak minds"(165)--petty domestic tyrants in Denmark's commercial households--and obsessive rituals: the king sits "with vacant eye, erect, receiving the homage of courtiers, who mock him with a shew of respect"(167). Seeing an intelligent person's equivocal position

epitomized by the fate of Caroline Matilda, Wollstonecraft feels the effrontery or loss implied in the "customs", "cruel insinuations" and political "prejudices"(166) which prevented the Queen from literally and symbolically "discharging the duty of a mother"(166), the key in Wollstonecraft's mind to woman's active citizenship and what Kristeva terms the potential "solid rock of jouissance"(167).

This same autonomous detachment and selfish "principle of self-preservation"(166) which frustrates a liberal and prudent government in Denmark is linked in the succeeding letter to the "tasteless" political or judicial spectatorship of Burkean theatrical and gothic "sublime terrour": instances of pain, confusion, magnificence and power which astonish the community but disassociate people from and even perpetuate actual suffering.<sup>9</sup> For example, in Letter nineteen Wollstonecraft challenges the rehearsed pageantry of death in the dramatic rendering of the anguish and the magnificence of the methodical destruction of the human body:

I have always been of opinion that the allowing actors to die, in the presence of the audience, has an immoral tendency; but trifling when compared with the ferocity acquired by viewing the reality as a show; for it seems in all countries the common people go to executions to see how the poor wretch plays his part . . . Consequently executions, far from being useful examples to the survivors, have, I am persuaded, a contrary effect, by hardening the heart they ought to terrify."(168)

The grotesque realism of a "poor wretch" dying an "ignominious death" before "common people" and "well-dressed women . . . returning with their children" from the "spectacle" of a body-burning, is a bathetic analogy to what Burke believes is the "most sublime and affecting

tragedy we have", that is, the public execution of "a state criminal of high rank". Wollstonecraft is repulsed by the theatricalization of the act of execution and the condition of aesthetic suspension which reduces the "real" to the level of make-believe, without achieving enough *distanciation* in the viewers to make them reflect on the social implications of a "breach of morality"(166). In her *Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, Wollstonecraft expresses her contempt for French theatre in similar terms, suggesting a correlation between aesthetic excess, the theatre of the scaffold and her rejection of a hypnotic state of sublime identification: "The sublime terrour, with which [theatrical scenes] fill the mind, may arouse, nay, delight; but whence comes the improvement? Besides, uncultivated minds are the most subject to feel astonishment, which is often another name for sublime sensations".<sup>10</sup> The "gaping crowd" leaves the execution as they might a tragedy, purged of their emotions but unimproved by any sympathetic reflections.

In contrast to this "pleasurable" state of sublime detachment, Burke's most macabre tropes for the political chaos become a sublime "she" in his counterrevolutionary writings when he cannot maintain a comfortable spatial distance from them.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the more psychological encounters with a sublime nature in *A Short Residence* are often read as Wollstonecraft's departure from an anticipatory relationship with the traditionally masculine literary mode of the Romantic sublime. And at issue in such passages is Wollstonecraft's relationship to nature as a terrible female figure, for the Romantic spectator feminizes threatening sublime landscapes (water, mountains,

chaos) as obstructions which cannot maintain their separateness from the creative mind of the writing subject without unleashing frightening excess. Hence we have "Mother Nature", a terrible "Madame Guillotine" and a female Frankenstein.<sup>12</sup> Thomas Weiskel offers a psychoanalytic explication of the need to confront the female sublime, claiming that the male subject confirms his own existence, his own unitary status through a struggle between the self and the (feminine) other that can be read as a confrontation staged in order to conceal a primordial longing to merge with the mother. In turn, Patricia Yaeger offers an alternative to the Oedipal scenario's insistence on a compensatory, self-affirming shift in which the father replaces the mother, by arguing for a "pre-oedipal sublime" which allows primordial elements ("geothermal energies"[191]) to break into consciousness and become a "healthful" motive for the metaphorical confrontation with the sublime (m)other.<sup>13</sup>

Critics are uneasy with Wollstonecraft's version of the Romantic sublime, reluctant to make her the bearer of meaning or the static (feminine) territory on which the primordial battle is waged, but also unwilling to wholly embrace Yaeger's conjecture of a permissive bonding with the mother's body.<sup>14</sup> I suggest that this is because neither explanation fully accommodates a sublime which, in many respects, transgresses on the "masculine" territory of hypsous or transport but which simultaneously struggles to remain *within* the realm of culture. As the Burkean passages suggest, Wollstonecraft finds herself stranded between a desire for transport, unity and empowerment and a sense of community which disallows both a unified stance (traditionally achieved through appropriation and domination of a "feminine") and a

more positive, ahistorical, semiotic empowerment.

In many passages in *A Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft recognizes this ambivalence as a solitary confrontation with the sublime which is nevertheless painfully fettered. Just as her account of her journey to Halden in Letter five, her sleeplessness in Letter one is the dubious privilege of the Revolutionary philosopher, whose restless moral and intellectual affections elevate her over her slumbering companions but deny her a "*gaite du coeur*" of "[h]appy thoughtlessness"(183): "What, I exclaimed, is this active principle which keeps me still awake?" Even the "iron-sinewed rocks"(66) which seem so intimidating and inseparable from the rest of Wollstonecraft's natural surroundings harmonize with the "general repose"(69) of northern nature, a sensuous union or dissolving into the landscape which baby Fanny, enviably, enjoys but which seems impossible for the world-weary adult:

Why fly my thoughts abroad when every thing around  
me appears at home? My child was sleeping with equal  
calmness--innocent and sweet as the closing flowers  
Some recollections, attached to the idea of home,  
mingled with reflections respecting the state of  
society I had been contemplating that evening, made  
a tear drop on the rosy cheek I had just kissed(69).

"At home" initially suggests Wollstonecraft's thankfulness for her daughter's serenity and her present certainty of a non-threatening nature, consolidated in the sight of the pretty "flower"-like form of the sleeping child. The second reference to the "idea of home" is an altogether more complex merging of the private and the public. It suggests Wollstonecraft's home in England, while her "kiss" and her "tear" on Fanny's cheek signify painful thoughts of Imlay and, perhaps,

of her "home" with him in a cottage at Nelly on the Seine in the summer of 1793, an intellectually and emotionally stimulating time in her life.

Wollstonecraft's reference to the "idea of home, mingled with reflections respecting the state of society"(69) also suggests a longing or an absence which is constructed as a distance in time as well as in space, or what J.M Fritzman refers to as a "messianic Now-Time": "a utopian moment when the past--which thereby becomes a future--is made present and fulfilled, a mystical *nunc stans*."<sup>15</sup> In other words, Wollstonecraft is on the "brink of extacy and agony"(69) remembering "home" because it is an idealized past that incorporated her pre-Revolutionary hopes for the future which in the present time have been "damped" by "disappointed affection" and by the "horrors [she] witnessed in France"(68). She asks herself,

What are these imperious sympathies? How frequently has melancholy and even misanthropy taken possession of me, when the world has disgusted me, and friends have proved unkind. I have then considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind;--I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself.(69-70)

Certainly Wollstonecraft emphasises her individual experience through the Romantic motif of the disinherited mind or the solitary (Byronic) individual, alienated from or rejected by her spiritual and physical homeland. Unlike her contemporaries, however, her "sympathy" persists as a form of entrapment or "adhesion", emphasised by the strange atomism of the "particle". The overall effect in this passage is a painful

interplay between the romantic and the domestic, a keen perception and an explicatory "flight of genius" which places Wollstonecraft, the revolutionary philosopher, both inside and outside of community.

One of the most frequently discussed passages in *A Short Residence*, often cited as an instance of a failed Romantic sublime,<sup>16</sup> but worth examining extensively as an instance of Wollstonecraft seeking communal understanding through a powerful mirroring of a natural object, is the description of waterfalls where men are constructing a canal near Trolhaetta, Sweden. Retreating from the prospect and becoming entranced to the point of stupor, . . . Wollstonecraft is not empowered by the view, at least not in the Romantic sense of transcendence and assertion of ego over natural object:

I must own that the first view of the cascade disappointed me . . . I, however, wandered about; and at last coming to the conflux of the various cataracts, rushing from different falls, struggling with the huge masses of rock, and rebounding from the profound cavities, I immediately retracted, acknowledging that it was, indeed a grand object . . . I gazed I know not how long, stunned with the noise; and growing giddy with only looking at the never-ceasing tumultuous motion, I listened, scarcely conscious where I was.(159)

Wollstonecraft's progression from disappointment to a calm, almost unconscious relation with nature and then to surprise and a moment of excess shared with the object is the conventional sequence of the Romantic sublime. It is the ego's recompense for material dissatisfaction, something which Coleridge observes in a passage which is uncannily applicable to Wollstonecraft's text: "Few have seen a celebrated waterfall without feeling something akin to disappointment: it is only subsequently that the image comes back full into the mind and brings with it a train

of grand or beautiful associations."<sup>17</sup> However, Wollstonecraft's passage diverges from what Thomas Weiskel refers to as the third or "reactive" stage of sublimity when the "mind recovers the balance of outer and inner" which visual fixation and overwhelming abundance (the subject's emotional or cognitive instability or the object's excess) unsettles, by "constituting a fresh relation between itself and the object."<sup>18</sup> This relation is often an empowering ego-affirming assertion of mind and imagination over perceived nature, or a pleasure in looking which is a narcissistic subterfuge for the artist's containment and self-preservation. For the spectator transforms his identification with the creative potential of a natural object into a moment of transcendence, thereby achieving a feeling of unity through the obliteration of the object's otherness.

Such rapture or empowerment is impossible in Wollstonecraft's passage because she resists the imagination's creation of a self-sustaining discrepancy between self and other, the metaphorical movement of self beyond the limits of representation and the hazardous involvement of the ego in uncomfortable alterity, painful immersion, conflict and emotional and linguistic excess and instability. Instead, her poetic reverie is safely grounded in Enlightenment reason, physical description and metaphor, and her narrative is controlled and confident: *it is* *latinate*, retrospective, pensive and assured in its technical and geographical descriptions ("precipitated itself with immense velocity down a perpendicular"[160]). Moreover, her attempt to place herself in the best position to observe the waterfall ("I wandered about until") is a picturesque framing technique which enables her to transform her

sensory experience into an imaginative act but also allows her to create a manageable relation with that which threatens to obliterate the "I" of her narrative. This way she succeeds in mingling the pleasantly ocular and faintly emotional picturesque with the terrible sublime. And chaos is external to the self, perhaps a mere visual illusion augmented by a deliberate act of "fancy": a "little island stood in the midst, covered with firs, which, by dividing the torrent, rendered it more picturesque; one half appearing to issue from a dark cavern"(159). For all its irregularity and roughness, the picturesque is comfortably visible and securely distant from the self, and it precludes a sublime "sterility" which threatens to become internalized.

However, the mitigating power of the picturesque--Wollstonecraft's unwillingness to transgress on the "masculine" terrain of *hypsous*--also suggests that this passage does not qualify as a pre-oedipal sublime. Though Wollstonecraft faithfully represents those qualities of the "dreadful convulsion of nature"(160) which produce physical and emotional responses, she ensures that the waterfall exists independently from its impact on the viewer: it does not threaten or delight her because she refuses to engage in the "intersubjective bliss" of the libidinal experience of the mother's body, which Jaeger claims is often "given an imaginative correlative in the chaos and blissful heterodoxy of the cosmos"(205). In other words, Wollstonecraft refuses a strategy of denaturalization or appropriation, but she also refuses to be taken out of herself. Certainly the waterfall's elemental "chaos", which seems to throw "waters from the very centre of the earth"(159), retains what she assumes is its inherent sublimity. Her pleasurable (re)creation of the

chasm's overwhelming, visual, auditory and kinesthetic stimulants ("rushing", "rebounding", "throwing", "tumultuous motion", "convulsion", "cleaving", "roaring", "trembled", "uproar", "purling") gives tumultuous life to the "dreary grandeur" and "wild scenes". And, in contrast to Wordsworth's attempt to convey unity in multiplicity or "permanence in flux" through images of vast and powerful nature, Wollstonecraft allows the perceived object to exist uncontained by her "fancy", for chaos is formless and orderless.<sup>19</sup> But nature is such an alien, "solitary" force that it refuses both a utopian incorporation into human society and a poetic integration into the viewer's psyche: Wollstonecraft may "gaze" and grow "stunned", but she suggests that a complete merging with a truly sublime natural force would literally and figuratively dash one to bits. The narrator's unstable physical stance on the edge of the "gulph" simply mirrors the impossibility of the creative imagination's appropriation of the scene for the sake of a personal influx of power: precariously balancing on the edge of the falls, she darkly and indulgently intimates a tumble into the "torrent", as swiftly and irresistibly as the "huge log" she watches fall "headlong down the cascade" and "steal peacefully into the purling stream"(160).

If Wollstonecraft stages a paradigmatic encounter with the Romantic sublime by recreating or mirroring the natural object but refuses to engage in the chaos of the waterfall, what then is her motive for deflecting the potentially empowering third or "reactive" stage of sublimity? Because she overlooks a construction site of "bustle" and "blowing", I would suggest that the "noise of human instruments"(160), the intrusive appearance of the canal works and even the displaced

spectacle of a boy fishing on crags which ought to "bid defiance even to the goat's activity" disrupt her contemplation of unapproachable grandeur and pit a dominating, masculine technological force against her own responsive and deferential recognition of the scene's supremacy: "instead of admiring the canal and the works, great as they are termed, and little as they appear, I could not help regretting that such a noble scene had not been left in all its solitary sublimity"(160).

Implied in this refusal of mercantilist and urban values is a preference for nature as a site for rejuvenation and nonalienating harmony. Yet Wollstonecraft's informed approval of the canal itself indicates that her observations are something more than a woman's momentary and naive spiritual withdrawal from the patriarchal order, or an instance of her nostalgic desire to escape the socio-political order and its modes of progress and development. Instead, her refusal to assert visual or creative preeminence over nature offers the narrator a vision of her social ideals. For her unwillingness to appropriate the sublime object is a political as well as an aesthetic expression of her own dislocation in a world she associates with Imlay's selfish and exclusionary commercial speculations, imaged in the unrelenting gouging and uproar of the construction site. Earlier in the text Wollstonecraft is proud of a Swedish Lieutenant's reference to her "*men's questions*"(68). Her italics self-consciously and ironically emphasize her ambivalent position in the masculine geographic, demographic, agricultural and mercantile world which is the descriptive focus of her narrative. A female revolutionary reformer and prudent parent is extraneous to the luxurious court government, the commercial "locusts"(195) and the

"indulgent mothers"(165) of Scandinavia, though Wollstonecraft is seen to incorporate but exceed their enterprises. With shrewd business sense she discusses the benefits of the "stupendous attempt"(157) to build the Trolhaettan canal, perhaps seeking a paternal legitimation to soften her subsequent dismissal of the self-engrossed, destructive potential of such technological tamperings. Her aesthetic and ethical sensibilities and her poignant awareness of women's unjust exclusion from the more positive aspects of the commercial world inspire an inversion of the infamous epithet that women are "children of a larger growth". She sardonically elides negative, self-engrossed masculine speculations with the "insignificant sport of children"(160), a comparison Anna Laetitia Barbauld would take up a year later in "Washing-Day": "To see Montgolfier, thy silken ball / Ride buoyant through the clouds--so near approach / The sports of children and the toils of men."<sup>20</sup>

If Wollstonecraft stages a confrontation with the sublime to express a moral and human sympathy in this passage, there are other encounters with the sublime in *A Short Residence* where her Romantic lyricism threatens to displace her historical consciousness. A passage worth examining in terms of the mind's confrontation with a "feminine" lack in discourse, symptomatic of a failure of narrative, is Wollstonecraft's description of her journey to the waterfall at Frederikstad in Letter 15. After Letter 12 the narrator's tone becomes progressively more brooding.<sup>21</sup> By the time she leaves Christiania, "black melancholy"(141) encroaches on all moments of heightened imagination, so that she begins to deprecate her style, calling her writing the "vapourings of a heart<sup>ill at ease</sup>" and "effusions of a sensibility<sup>wounded almost to madness</sup>"(141).

Narrative in Letter 15 itself seems free and associative, to the point that Wollstonecraft's sorrow--the sublime's self-referential, nostalgic yearning for unity--threatens to overthrow the orderly progression of her prose, though she manages to sustain her Romantic motifs: a forceful condemnation of the "present state of society" and a vision of authentic, whole subjectivity which may be recovered in a mythic (re)discovery of "another state of existence."<sup>(141)</sup> Identifying with the "imprisoned life" of decaying pine trees she exclaims,

I cannot tell why--but death, under every form,  
appears to me like something getting free--to  
expand in I know not what element; nay I feel  
that this conscious being must be as unfettered,  
have the wings of thought before it can be happy.  
(152)

This excerpt is perhaps the closest Wollstonecraft comes to transcendence, envisioned as the traveller/poet's freedom of movement and as her mind's unfettered, lofty capacity. She looks to a remote future, a sublime plenitude or a pleasurable death-longing which resembles the quiet but willed transformation which Kristeva observes in the suicides of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Maria Tsvetaeva: a woman "can carry off such things without tragedy, even without drama, without the feeling that she is fleeing a well-fortified front, but rather as though it were simply a matter of making an inevitable, irresistible and self-evident transition."<sup>22</sup> Like Mary and Maria of her novels, Wollstonecraft is fascinated with passive, sensual, involuntary<sup>23</sup> death, also imaged in popular representations of Marie Antoinette, Charlotte Corday and Marie Roland swooning before Robespierre, the Assembly, and the State. Fittingly, these depictions combine political disappointments of the most sublime order with an irresistible, satiating

pre-oedipal union. As Kristeva argues, both the psychic and the social assail the ego at times when family, history and, consequently, the Superego are at an impasse: this is the "call from the mother", a woman's love for her mother which "like black lava, [has] lain in wait for her all along the path of her desperate attempts to identify with the symbolic paternal order".<sup>24</sup>

Not surprisingly then, in terms of the conventional Romantic sublime, Wollstonecraft's description of the waterfall itself is a failure; for she does not create a willed relation to the natural world in order to confirm her univocity. The metaphysical significance of the waterfall itself, as an image of life, death, rebirth and immortality, is carefully framed within the narrative by veiled fantasies or ironic intimations of drowning, which contribute an oppressive sense of loss, suspension and delay. The narrator displays a glib indifference to whether she goes "down or across the stream"(151) at the ferry and an inattention to her wet clothes in cold weather. Detained by the conditions of the road, she must wait an extra day to make her journey to the viewpoint, on the way to which she surveys a sterile land in perpetual "mourn[ing]"(152), a landscape which creates a suffocating sublimity: "rugged and dreary" roads and "bare" rock which are rather desolate than sublime. As the narrator approaches the cascade, she finds her senses are overwhelmed by the "roaring" water and "dark cavities" which "[mock] the exploring eye". Literally, the depth of the cataracts and the mists rising out of them obstruct her view, while the resounding noise and, perhaps, its humidity cause her to hesitate before this superior natural force. Temporal, logical relations between

Wollstonecraft's thoughts break into nonperiodic sentences, in which component clauses are fragmented:

Still the tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited, were pleasurable; and viewing it, my soul rose, with renewed dignity, above its cares--grasping at immortality--it seemed as impossible to stop the current of my thoughts, as of the always varying, still the same, torrent before me I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come.(153)

This confusion is a precondition for the Burkean rather than the Romantic sublime. Loud or intermittent, mysterious noises, conducive to the sublime setting, are sufficient to "overpower the soul" or to "suspend its action", while successions of visual objects (such as the "impetuous dashing" of water) produce actual physical exhaustion. Even the numerous parentheses in Wollstonecraft's passage serve a representational function, an iconic miming of Burke's claims that "apparent disorder augments the grandeur [of the sublime object], for the appearance of care is highly contrary to our ideas of magnificence" and "when any work seems to have required immense force and labor to effect it, the idea is grand".<sup>25</sup>

If Wollstonecraft fails to achieve Romantic transcendence what, then, makes this passage so life-affirming? For, despite the tremendous sense of lack and deferral surrounding the journey and the narrator's foreboding contemplation of "immortality", Wollstonecraft's oscillation between striving towards transcendence and longing to dissolve being altogether is pleasurable. Certainly her attempts to convert her dark reflections into a "kind of pleasure" or a site for the beautiful ("new growth", "endless variety" of foliage, "peaceful streams") and to

envision her transcendence of the restrictions of the body are satisfying. Moreover, there is a generative power in her refusal to achieve ego-affirmation by dominating the sublime other. I would suggest, however, that what is most pleasing in Wollstonecraft's tropes is a yearning for wholeness and transcendence which oddly enough situates her sublime in the here and now. Very well might she ask, as she stands over the "impetuous dashing of the rebounding" falls and her "thoughts dart from heaven to earth", why she is "chained to life and its misery"(152). Her projection of her frenzied thoughts and "exploring eye" into the grand, threatening natural force and her "soul" into an idealized eternity suggest a yearning for transcendent meaning in this life.

Unlike the solitary, detached immanence of either Romantic or Burkean sublime transport, this self-presence is a movement towards social integration, a moral and social phenomenon which creates a bond between the narrator and her reader. Wollstonecraft may be a "solitary wanderer", to borrow the title and focus of Rousseau's work, yet she recognizes the performative value of her search for self-identity and presupposes an audience she must interact with, and in which she must evoke empathy and identification. Her hesitant self-emphasis inspires identification and processes of involvement which the text's consciously literary elements would otherwise disrupt. The paragraph which first solicits the reader's interest, beginning, "How I am altered by disappointment!" is (unlike the personal letter to Imlay from which it is adapted) carefully structured, breaking off confessional meditation in mid-sentence to solicit the concern of a more general audience through

its spontaneity and its brimming emotion: "When going to Lisbon. . . my imagination could dip her brush in the rainbow of fancy, and sketch futurity in glowing colours. Now--but let me talk of something else--will you go with me to the cascade?"(151) Wollstonecraft makes similarly self-conscious references when her private pain threatens to disrupt the social functions which her narrative serves, betraying acts of self-creation and negotiation even at the most pitiable moments of fatigue and melancholy.

Thus Wollstonecraft's sublime is at once a very intimate and a very social response, a desire to cross boundaries between self and other, flesh and spirit, life and death which dissolves meaning, that is to say, the sublime's trust in its paternal foundations. For she exposes the inadequacy of a sublime mode which allows a myth of selfhood to transcend the ties of the familial and the social but also suggests that the mind can emerge successfully from a moment of crisis--an unsettling, disorderly multiplication of stimuli--with a pleasurable "renewed dignity" of "soul"(152). In this respect, she will not settle for anything less than her ideal of eternity: the creative, self-discovering energy revealed in natural objects which, nevertheless, mocks one with a "glimpse of unattainable perfection".<sup>26</sup> She does, after all, cast herself in the role of Cassandra, fascinatingly linking a mythical sexual assault and desperate public appeal to Imlay's "baleful" betrayal and "extensive speculations"(193), his inability to "love humanity, and then individuals"(103). Wollstonecraft's own urgent discourse with sublime objects and with her reader places her both outside and inside of language: the "warning voice" of the "prophetess" is, as Kristeva notes,

"something that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both here, as dejects, and *there*, as others sparkling. A divergence, an impossible bounding"(12).

1. Historically, the sublime is a masculine aesthetic category, usually contrasted with a supine and trivial "feminine" beauty. Barbara Freeman writes that "Dorothy Wordsworth, or any woman of her period, could not have written a poem such as "Tintern Abbey"; for "Wordsworth, the poet of the "egotistical sublime" . . . inherits as his birthright a self-assurance, entitlement, and confidence in his right to speak and be heard that no woman of his era could share" in *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Woman's Fiction*, (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1995) 8. Jane Moore also dismisses sublime transcendence as a viable option: "because Wollstonecraft *is a woman*, and is therefore bound by the legal and social restrictions placed on her sex in the eighteenth-century, she can only envisage autonomy of any form after death"(150).

2. The grandeur of an imposing object, animal or person, such as Shelley's skylark (the "high-born maid") or Wordsworth's leechgatherer (a "huge stone" or a "sea-beast"), representing mythic, transcendent power is visually framed and then internalized by the poet, who first celebrates then laments its terrific externality.

3. "Hints", *Works of Wollstonecraft*, vol 5.

4. William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery, and Other Woodland Views, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* (London, 1791), p.298. Qtd. in Stephan Copley, "William Gilpin and the black-lead mine", *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, landscape and aesthetics since 1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 49.

5. *Letters to Imlay*, 291.

6. Compare to exchanges made on pages 125 and 156 those on pages 183 and 188.

7. Interpreting the food miracles and several of Christ's teachings in the New Testament, Kristeva argues that the Eucharist is able to acknowledge abjection because the abomination of pure/impure, inside/outside of Levitical law becomes interior and permanent: "Body and spirit, nature and speech, divine nourishment, the body of Christ, assuming the guise of a natural food (bread), signifies me both as divided (flesh and spirit) and infinitely lapsing".(118)

8. "A Philosophical Enquiry" in *Literary Criticism and Theory: The Greeks to the Present* ed. Robert Con Davis and Laurie Finke (New York: Longman, 1989) 380.

9. This is also true of earlier poets. For example, in "The Castaway" Cowper notes a melancholy fascination with a drowning man: "misery still delights to trace / Its semblance in another's case". Likewise, Collins embraces the ecstatic self-absorption which Fear evokes: "O Fear, I know thee by my throbbing heart; / Thy withering power inspired each mournful line".

10. *Political Writings* 230.

11. Freeman, 47.

12. The guillotine is always feminized. Regina Jones claims that the "Maiden" is a "single-toothed vagina dentata. The man who flirts with her attempts to retain or assert his sexual dominance." in "Beheadings", *Death and Representations*, ed. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1993) 255. Both the monster and Victor Frankenstein are conflated with heinous femininity and maternity. See, for example, Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Women's Writing* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 100-119; Anne K. Mellor, "Possessing Nature: The Female in *Frankenstein*," in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988) 220-32, and Paul Youngquist, "Frankenstein: The Mother, The Daughter, and the Monster," *Philological Quarterly* 70.3 (Summer 1991): 339-59. See Neil Hertz, "The Notion of blockage in the literature of the sublime", in *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text: Selected Papers from the English Institute 1976-77* ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978). Also see Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: John Hopkins's UP, 1976).

13. Jaeger locates an impossibility for women writing in this mode in the "normal retrieval of mythic powers that are initially alienated in order to insure their internalization." She claims that for a man this "energy is finally reappropriated, so as to strengthen the ego," but for a woman "such retrieval is . . . abnormal or deviant". "Toward a Female Sublime", *Gender and Theory: Dialogues in Feminist Criticism*, ed. Linda Kauffman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 210. Jaeger's view is informed by a Kristevan reconfiguration of Lacan's assumption that the repression of the primary relationship to the maternal body is necessary to achieve cultural meaning, and her supposition has informed subsequent studies of "feminine" sublimity.

14. For example, Eleanor Ty and Jeanne Moskal both emphasize Wollstonecraft's negotiation with the semiotic and with the symbolic world of the father; although Ty claims that it strengthens Wollstonecraft's non-symbolic or literal language, Moskal regrets that Wollstonecraft is empowered neither by a multiplication of meaning nor by a "sublime of expenditure", an expanding outward towards others, as opposed to a phallic fight to the death with the father. "Female Confinement Literalized: The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria", *Unsex'd Revolutionaries: Five Women Novelists of the 1790's* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 1-46. Karen Hust resists a psychoanalytical encounter which presupposes a "Mother" nature, pp.499-501.

15. "The Future of Nostalgia and the Time of the Sublime", *Clio* 23.2 (1993) 168.

16. For example, Moore claims that "Whereas Wordsworth physically removes himself from the grand object, Wollstonecraft stays put. But this is not an assertive gesture. On the contrary, her retraction . . . renders her immobile: she retracts into herself, but in doing so she loses her sense of herself." 52

17. See John Whale, "Romantics, explorers and Picturesque travellers", *Politics of the Picturesque*, 179-80.

18. Quoted in Weiskel 23-25.

19. David B. Morris, *The Religious Sublime: Christian Poetry and Critical Tradition in 18th-Century England* (Lexington: U of Kentucky Press, 1972) 192. Kant's theory of the sublime is an exception, for he attempts to contain formlessness and chaos.

20. *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989) 308-310.

21. Richard Holmes claims that Wollstonecraft's tone changes after Letter 16, when she receives word that Imlay will not join her in Hamburg, see "Notes" p. 289. However, I believe the turning point is Letter 12; henceforth she becomes increasingly tired and reflective on her way back to Gothenburg and her daughter, "sinking into reveries" (136) and less distracted by the natural landscape.

22. Julia Kristeva, "About Chinese Women", *The Kristeva Reader* ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 158.

23. Janet Todd observes that in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Wollstonecraft conflates "women, supineness, luxury, indulgence, power, consumption, enervation, sloth, lasciviousness, licentiousness, effeminacy and sexuality", 107.

24. "I Who Want Not to Be", *The Kristeva Reader* ed. Toril Moi (New York, Columbia UP, 1986) 159.

25. *Philosophical Enquiry* 430.

26. "On Poetry" 270.

### Conclusion

Wollstonecraft's attempt to achieve sublime transcendence in *A Short Residence* succeeds only in so far as she feels the metaphor of ascendancy is a social response. It must satisfy communal aspirations (including her insistence on woman's active role in society), evoke identification and sympathy in her reader and/or metaphorically dissolve barriers between herself and some other (nature, her daughter, Imlay, or Fanny Blood).

Yet Wollstonecraft's discomfort during moments of sublime self-creation suggests that she is not motivated by a longing for intimacy, sympathy, or generosity, all of which are implied in the "domestic sublimity" of her contemporaries. On the contrary, her landscape aesthetics express anxiety with the disturbing proximity of pure and impure, order and disorder and, ultimately, the imperfect notions of masculine and feminine which inform her argument for woman's self-governance. Perhaps examination of the abject and the sublime as expressions of the peril of the "feminine" should make us less willing to ponder the weaknesses in Wollstonecraft's argument for woman's access to culture and more willing to accept her aesthetic as a testament, at once painful and delightful, to what is, in her own words, the "unnatural fermentation"(198) of a mind "wishing to do immediately what can only be done by time"(166).

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VITA

Last name: Harper

Given Names: Heather Megan

Place of Birth: Dawson Creek, British Columbia, Canada

Educational Institutions Attended:

University of Victoria	1991 to 1997
Northern Lights College	1990 to 1991

Degrees Awarded:

B.A. (Honours)            University of Victoria 1995

Honours and Awards:

University of Victoria Departmental Fellowship 1995-1997

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Author

Heather Megan Harper  
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