RAOUL GRANQVIST

Her Imperial Eyes: A Reading of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*[1]

1. Mary Wollstonecraft's maps

Going north for Mary Wollstonecraft was not only a movement in natural space, it involved above all a transfer towards a landscape associated with perceptions outside her ideological control. The common understanding was that the North embodied the periphery, as much as did Wales, Ireland and Nootka Sound on the American west coast (127), coastal areas she often alludes to for analogy and parallel. "Man must...have been placed in the north, to tempt him to run after the sun, in order that the different parts of the earth might be peopled" (52), she speculates. These regions were, from the metropolitan centre's perspective, underdeveloped, rugged, Ossianic, primitive, places where the countrygirls were unable to control their impulses and required correction and surveillance from the likes of her (39, 116). The centre belonged to England and France, or if you like to the elite of these societies, or if you wish to extend this metonymy further, to Mary Wollstonecraft herself. Germany, she observes, was speedily catching up; it was in any case a more intelligent country than Norway-Denmark, if not so "wild" (238), she ruminates. And Norway was more advanced than Sweden! The dogmas of such centres and centres-in formation had to take hold if the Scandinavian and Irish countrygirls were to improve their manners. For a woman such as Wollstonecraft to travel north, then, was – as it was for another English writing lady, Ethel Brilliana Tweedie, exactly one hundred years later – to step into the swamp area, to dirty one's shoes and chill one's heart, to retrograde, to take deathly risks.[2] The same risks that Englishmen were prepared to take in the increasing travelling to Africa in the next century. So why go north? Well, because it involved a dream, a utopia, the colonialist's vision of hegemony.

Her second map, her shorescape map, delineates her vertical movements, up and down cliffs, rocks, hills, always in search for the best view-

[1] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796; Fontwell, Sussex: Centaur Press, 1970).

[2] Raoul Granqvist, "The Travel Text as Appropriation: a Victorian Lady in Russian Finland", *Orbis Litterarum* 50 (1995): 193-206.

ing-point, but more importantly, her perpendicular exursions into the main land and back to the shore. This map is multi-dimensional. It is one of frontiers and demarcations. It includes the barren sea shore, the sparse strips of wooden areas beyond it and the rich soil of cultivated land even further away from the "sterile" (one of her favourite expressions) zone of the sea. Wollstonecraft's geological terminology projects the landscape as a carrier of life forms and social patterns in a predetermined and absolute ranking order. She is reluctant even to call a shore a shore, because of the horrors it awakens in her. "It was too late for me to go onshore, if you will allow me to give that name to shivering rocks, to ascertain the fact" (126).

The geologists of the time, as Alain Corbin has pointed out, provided the writers and the poets of the seashore with the stock images. The shore, they explained, contained the archives of the earth.[3] Its cliffs and caves were repositories of a Golden Age, its moss, plants, and animal life bald rudiments and vivid reminiscences of times bygone. The strata and layers of the rocks and the fir trees growing successively bigger the further you moved from the waterline demonstrated the blessings of evolutionary, stratified time. Development and progress were not only concepts used to define human life. Wollstonecraft sprinkles her account with semi-scientific glosses which she elaborates and transforms skilfully to accomodate her picturesque travel project and ideological mapping of the North. "My eyes sought in vain for the vestige of human habitation", she states right at the beginning of her journey; she can only see "the huge, dark rocks, that looked like the rude materials of creation forming the barrier of unwrought space..." (5). She is astounded at discovering that there are so few sandy beaches and that "the waves [were] continually beating against the bare rocks, without ever receding to leave a sediment to harden" (64-65). The shore is sterile and dead, it is brute creation, she is literally repelled, as the prototypic Romantic traveller facing this sight (site) was expected to be. The following is a typical passage filled with characteristic elegiac undertones of disgust at God's unforgiveable exclusion of the (linear) shore from Paradise.

> The clouds caught their hue of the rocks that menaced them. The sun appeared afraid to shine, the birds ceased to sing, and the flowers to bloom; but the eagle fixed his nest high among the rocks, and the vulture hovered over this abode of desolation. ...The current of life seemed congealed at the source: all were not frozen; for it was summer, you remember: but everything appeared so dull, that I waited to see ice, in order to reconcile me to the abscence of gaiety. (49-50)

No wonder she finds "Sweden...the country in the world most proper to

[3] See Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World 1750-1840* (London: Polity Press, 1994) 20-110.

form the botanist and the natural historian" as "every object seemed to remind me of the creation of things, of the first efforts of sportive nature" (47).

There is a little more relief, she experiences, in viewing the area between the shore and the farmland. Especially the fir trees growing at some distance from the shore fill her with awe and respect. "I did homage to their venerable shadows", she says, acknowledging their resourcefullness to her as a picturesque writer, "nothing can be better calculated to produce poetic images" (109).[4] The ugly seashore must be held at bay, as it were, or when possible, invaded. "Admiring...these noble forests, which seem to bid defiance to time, I looked *with pain* on the ridge of rocks that stretched far beyond my eye" (173; my emphasis). The fir trees seem to her to form a shelter against the sea, they prevent life from collapsing into a perverse meaninglessness, they "brave the elements", she explains (125).

> Towards the frontiers [!] they [the cottages] grew worse and worse in their appearance, as if not willing to put sterility itself out of countenance. No gardens smiled round the habitations, not a potatoe or cabbage to eat with the fish drying on a stick near the door. A little grain here and there appeared, the long stalks of which you might almost reckon. The day was gloomy when we passed over this rejected spot, the wind bleak, and winter seemed to be contending with nature, faintly struggling to change the season. Surely, thought I, if the sun ever shines here, it cannot warm these stones; moss only cleaves to them, partaking of their hardness; and nothing like vegetable life appears to chear [sic] with hope the heart. (51)

The step-by-step deterioration (from house to cottage to hut, from garden to rock) is total, encapsulating both social norms and typological forms. Her ideal then is the farmscape. "Meadows, like lawns, in an endless variety, displayed the careless graces of nature; and the riping corn gave a richness to the landscape, analogous with the other objects" (150). As Michael Bunce has pointed out in *The Countryside Ideal: Anglo-American Images of Landscape* by the end of the eigthteenth-century domesticated nature had become natural nature.[5] It comes as no surprise either that Wollstonecraft would pick examples from Norway to convey her farmscape ideal, as Norway seemed to her a much more advanced country than Sweden (69, 84). In Norway the rocks bow to her compelling eyes; the shores were "finely wooded to the water's edge". She sums up: "Little art appeared, yet sublimity every where gave place to elegance. The road hade often assumed the appearance of a graveled one, made in pleasure grounds, whilst the trees excited only an idea of embellishment" (150).

[4] Such a poetic image is associated with 'death'. "The grey, cobweb-like appearance of the aged pines is a much finer image of decay; the fibres whitening as they lose their moisture, imprisoned life seems to wither away" (174).

[5] Michael Bunce, *The Countryside Ideal: Anglo-American Images of Landscape* (London and New York: Routledge, 1955) 28-34.

Her travel or journey from the Nidingen in the Kattegatt, through Malösund, Gothenburg, Strömstad, Larvik in Norway, Tönsberg, Helegeraa, Risör, Kristiania, Strömstad, Gothenburg again, Helsingborg, Elsinore, Copenhagen, Hamburg and eventually London, on a ship, in rowing boats, by cabriolets, post carriages etc., and mostly on her own, forms the contours of her Scandinavian itinerary. This map may be considered secondary to the other maps we have looked at; it could, I suggest, even be replaced – she might have written a more or less similar version of a trip along the Welsh or the Scottish coastline – were it not that history denies and derides such an assumption. She did travel in Scandinavia, for also very private reasons that are only partially revealed by the text, but of which Per Nyström offers an excellent account in his book *Mary Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian Journey*.[6]

2. Her imperial eyes

Wollstonecraft's manner of characterizing the people living in the seascape recollects the kind of glossary that colonialist writers would employ to signify the Other for the next hundred years or so. Her taxonomy is simple; biology and geology provide her with the main stock of ideological and semantic props to deride, rank and reject. Social life replicates biological life. She associates, then, the people she encounters along the coastline with rudimentary moss-life, cave-life, fish-life. They eat only to survive, they have little imagination to "fructify the faint glimmerings of mind which entitles them to rank as lords of the creation", they are sluggish and lazy (6) – she is literally disgusted and she is deadly serious. "What, indeed, is to humanize these beings, who rest shut up, for they seldom even open their windows, smoking, drinking brandy, and driving bargains?" (135). They live in ugly huts, from which they seldom come out – not even to ogle at her, she complains – they eat odious rye bread and fish (51) – not potatoes or cabbage, as they would have no gardens that only exist in the other zones. "Their tables, like their compliments, seem equally a caricature of the french [sic]. ... Spices and sugar are put into every thing, even into bread;..." (22-23). They are a bargaining people – the lowest caste in Wollstonecraft's human family – they stink as does as their rotten fish trade.[7] They are immoral, we saw; their love is mere animal lust (185), their passions "casual sympathies of the moment" (39). The simple women of the seascape, she suggests, are no more than inanimate fish (97-98). The captains' wives fare a little bit

[6] Per Nyström, *Mary Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian Journey,* Göteborg: Vetenskaps- o. vitterhetssamhället, 1980.

[7] "For the putrifying herrings, which they use as their manure, after the oil has been extracted, spread over the patches of earth, claimed by cultivation, destroyed every other" (46).

better: "as their minds were totally uncultivated, I did not lose much, perhaps gained, by not being able to understand them...but they excited my sympathy" (101). What she gained of course is self-directed authority and power without which she could not to bolster her imperial vision.

Wollstonecraft purports then to translate the bourgeois cultural ethics of taste, arts and sciences ("the pleasures of the senses" 21, 39) into an essentialist cultural programme for the people of the borderlands, "till they are stimulated to think for themselves" (111), as she puts it in her blunt manner. To achieve this, nature (human as well as vegetative) has to be manipulated, the people of the seaboard educated and the landscape they inhabit colonized. As we already have pointed out she is willing to give credit to the Norwegian farmers because they "cut away the wood, they clear the ground". For this reason their "country is becoming fitter to support the inhabitants" (115). On her way out of Sweden she is surprised, however, to discover that there were "plains of varied crops [that] stretched out to a considerable extent, and sloped down to the shore, *no longer terrific"* (195; my emphasis). So there was hope for Sweden too. Her ideal and "well-arranged" landscape is copied on southern British farmscapes; her equally domesticated ideal citizen is a carbon copy of herself.

As all imperial projects hers is also based on the rhetorical assumptions of "freedom". One of Wollstonecraft's most-employed images juxtaposes seaside life with languishing and pining in confinement or prison (133, 139, 141, 174). "Sluggish" people have to be awakened and the "mourning" landscape (172-73) freed, torn out of its slumber and stagnation. In her story about Finland Tweedie would even establish a definite year (1863) for the start of the country's wakening process (Granqvist 194). These peripheric ugly landscapes were, then, waiting to be "liberated" and re-dressed by a brave new tribe of superior intellects. "Approaching the frontiers, consequently the sea", Wollstonecraft explains, "nature resumed an aspect ruder and ruder, or rather seemed the bones of the world *waiting to be clothed with everything necessary to give life and beauty*" (49; my emphasis). These metaphors are well-known to any reader of western colonial novels and travelogues. The seascape, her doctrines teach then, will be "liberated", in the same fashion as she herself will eventually break out of her temporary exile and head for the free-breathing mainland (read: England).

> Talk not of bastilles! to be born here, was to be bastilled by nature – shut out from all that opens the understanding, or enlarges the heart...I shuddered at the thought of...remaining here, in the solitude of ignorance. (133-34)

Although she is more than anxious to get away from the site of her exploration, it remains, however, the duty of metropolitan intellectuals like herself, she proposes, to engage themselves in imperial projects. "I am...more and more convinced that a metropolis...is best calculated for the improvement of the heart, as well as the understanding" (33). And she further clarifies what this responsibility may entail:

> It is the patient labour of men [of the metropolis], who are only seeking for a subsistence, which produces whatever embellishes existence, affording leisure for the cultivation of the arts and sciences, that lift man so far above his first state. (115)

Mary Wollstonecraft's trip along the seascape of southern Sweden represents then an allegorical contemporary version of western man's self-aggrandizement and cultural bombast. The value system embedded in its demonization of a particular space and race was free-ranging; her southern Sweden coastline would only be interchanged with coastlines far more exotic and alien. The basic principles of apologizing and rationalizing intrusions and invasions would remain the same throughout the next two centuries.

3. The composition

A number of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century social practices and cultural traditions intersect in Mary Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian travel story. There is first of all the contemporary craze for travelling along a set group of European coastlines and the interest in reading about such adventures. This kind of itinerary had become a cult and an identification icon for the European metropolitan classes with enough money and time at their disposal. Studying cliff formations, penetrating caves and marvelling at their disclosure of time, admiring mans's taming of the elements at Schveningen outside The Hague and even venturing a bathe in the sea became well-defined attractions for the very first generation of European tourists.[8] Equally important was the depiction or the narrativization of these journeys. Without it the journey was considered incomplete. Thus hundreds of more or less similar stories poured out over Europe, Mary Wollstonecraft's is only one of them. The traditions of Dutch landscape painting and the romantic quest for the sublime went hand in hand, formulating the guidelines of how such a story should be told. And our traveller breaks no rules, only sharpens the convention. Moreover, she has a mission to perform; something fresh to tell her readers that has never been told before. If we pour into this broth of influences some bold ingredients from Ossianic literature and the literatures about the North, about hyperborean nature, the magic of Edda, fog, cold, and overcast skies, we have a fuller

[8] Corbin 98-108.

understanding of the complex literary background against which she projects – using a painter's brush and a poet's sketchbook – her story about the imperatives of European integration and expansion.

Mary Wollstonecraft organizes her visual observations within the strict frame of a foreground, a middle ground and a background, precisely as the landscape painter would do. These bounded segments contain the three landscape types we are familiar with already. Regularly she positions herself in front of her own creation, to admire it or comment on it, thus dislodging the narrative voice from her authored pictorial scene. This operation makes it also possible for her to enter the scene and become its chief participant or protagonist, its pining heroine. However, this only takes place in the foreground, in the shore landscape; outside, or beyond it, it she remains the detached London intellectual, critic and alleged revolutionary.

Her geography is extremely visual. She sees, views, gazes; she is obsessed with her own role as a viewer. "My eyes sought in vain for..." (5), "I was eager to climb the rocks to see better..." (10), "a beautiful lake relieved and charmed my eyes" (56) and the most relieving and also the most beautiful expression of them all, "With what ineffable pleasure have I not gazed – and gazed again, losing my breath through my eyes..." (94). Her eyes are an instrument which she can direct as she wishes, it seems, but which also can be directed by the sheer magic of the object. The "dark cavities of [the cascade]... mocked the exploring eye" (174), she admits trying to focus on the falls at Trollhättan. Her eyes seek possession of the landscape; they pull it towards her, they name it.[9] Her eyes may be a woman's but her gaze is male. She creates panoramic scenes were parts and the whole attempt to cohere, where human and vegetative life seek to collaborate.

> I visited near Gothenburg, a house with improved land about it, with which I was particularly delighted. It was close to a lake embosomed in pine clad rocks. In one part of the meadows, your eye was directed to the broad expanse; in another, you were led into a shade, to see a part of it, in the form of river, rush amongst the fragments of rocks and roots of trees; nothing seemed forced. (34-35)

"Nothing seemed forced", she says pointing to the 'equilibrum' of the passage *or* the scene. There had to be harmony then inside the text as well as outside it. Balancing opposites or near-opposites was a virtue that William Gilpin had taught her. In fact his *Three Essays; On Picturesque Beauty, on Sketching Landscape, on Picturesque Travel* had appeared a couple of years (1794) before she sat down to write about her travel. Saw-mills, for instance, near the cascades at Trollhättan "destroyed the harmony of the prospect" (175). She is constantly on the lookout for correspondences and analogies or, to use the Romantic jargon of the day, "sympathies". She discovers them, of course, or rather she construes them, implicating or impregnating them with her conspiracies, her own concerns. "I had been particularly pleased with many cottages situated close to a brook, or bordering on a lake, with the whole farm contiguous" (165).

9 See Paul Rodaway, *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); for an excellent overview of the history of Western senses, see Constance Classen, *Words of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures (*London: Routledge, 1993).

As a rule the scenes she paints mostly present some aspects of abhorrence and negation and invite her to sermonize and moralize. The fusion of the aesthetic and the moral was one of the main objectives of the picturesque writer and so it is with Wollstonecraft. In the following quote the expansiveness of the view she confronts is marred and troubled by the offensive cliffs and the "clump of pines".

> The view of the town was now extremely fine. A huge rocky mountain stood up behind it; and a vast cliff stretched on each side, forming a semicircle. In the recess of the rocks was a clump of pines, amongst which a steeple rose picturesquely beautiful. (138-39)

Another introduces the city of Christiania

> with the view of an extensive undulated valley, stretching out under the shelter of a noble amphitheatre of pine-covered mountains...The view...as we drove down the mountain, was almost spoilt by the depredations committed on the rocks to make alum. (155)

Note again her reservations!

Her search for microcosmos ("I was still a part of a mighty whole", 15) with herself at its abolute centre conditions her concept of moral and social life. By projecting a sorrowful and melancholic ego agonized by life's vicissitudes, she is able to extend the metonymy to represent much wider categories. If her body and soul are tested and recuperated through the seascape insinuations of horror, graveyards and thoughts of death (139), by an inverted logic the seascape itself may harvest the blessings of the cultivated and "liberated" inland zones. "How silent and peaceful was the scene. I gazed around with rapture, and felt more of that spontaneous pleasure which gives credibility to our expectation of happiness... I forgot the horrors I had witnessed in France..." (11).

Conclusion

The objective of this essay has been to demonstrate the character of Mary Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian travelogue as a persuasive pamphlet advocating the basic principles of European imperial thinking. Her narrative, I have suggested, is circumscibed by three overlapping maps: the Old World map that placed the North in the periphery and metropolitan London in the

centre; the seascape map that projects the conflict between sterility and cultivation, betweeen rock and farmland; and the third map that represents the circular movement of her factual trip basically from London to modern Oslo and back.

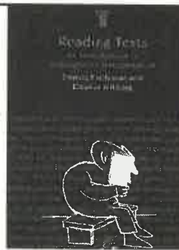
I have also shown how the struggle between the two biospheres is dramatized by a parallel tension on the human level where the seascape people and their living conditions are portrayed with a colonialist's degrading glosses and metaphors. Explicity and implicitly, her travelogue insists that it is "civilized" Europe's – England's and France's – duty to undertake the campaign to improve the conditions of "barbaric" people. Her main metaphor for this rotates around aspects of confinement and imprisonment. Her colonization programme is a freedom appeal.

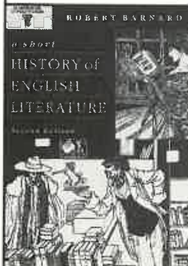
To produce a cultural tract of the strongest persuasion Mary Wollstonecraft has first of all resorted to a number of interlinking literary and cultural traditions; secondly, she has synthesized her observations through her eyes which renders power and hegemony to her, what then could be called, "masculine" construct of space and people; thirdly, she has "humanized" and thus problematized her narrative by inserting a split persona, the agonized Romantic ego and the detached intellectual.

Reading Texts
An Introduction to Strategies of Interpretation
Danuta Fjellestad – Eleanor Wikborg

Reading Texts aims to bridge the gap between sophisticated theory and students' own experience of texts. The book is designed to develop students' analytical skills. They are challenged to analyse their own interpretations.

ISBN 82-00-22696-4 1995
Teaching Suggestions ISBN 82-00-22695-6 1995





A Short History of English Literature
Robert Barnard

The author looks selectively at the most important writers within each period from the time of Chaucer. He deals briefly with the earlier periods and more fully with the past two centuries, moving right to the present with detailed coverage of the post-war novel and theatre.

ISBN 82-00-03993-5
1995, 2nd edition

Böckerna kan köpas i bokhandeln eller beställas direkt från FörlagsSystem AB
Box 30195 104 25 Stockholm Tel: 08-13 05 85 Fax: 08-618 34 70 E-post: order@fsys.se

UNIVERSITETSFORLAGET Box 3255 103 65 Stockholm
Tel: 08-440 80 40 Fax: 08-440 80 50
E-post: books@scup.se Internet: www.scup.no
UNIVERSITETSFORLAGET

H. W. FAWKNER

Roots of the Geo-Poetic Going beyond Linguistic Man

It is a latterday fashion in late twentieth-century literary circles to hold that literature is primarily a form of language. In the literary artifact, nothing escapes from language or from the principles of language. Even "the other" is organized as a language (Lacan). For Linguistic Man, in short, there is no other. Linguistic Man is too egocentric to admit an other (for instance a poetic other) that would presence itself in terms of not-language. Linguistic Man does his best to transform the world into a library and the human being into a librarian.

Contra the librarian, however, it may be asserted that the roots of the linguistic artifact are not in essence linguistic. In the manner of the contemporary Scottish poet Kenneth White, we need to call attention to this smudging of difference. Once we lose sight of the ontological difference between language and the roots of language, we find ourselves living not only in a language without roots but in a world without roots. In order to fight nihilism *as a writer,* the one who writes cannot merely indulge in "writing". The writer must dismantle the world of verbiage and effectuate a showing of the archaic spaces that antecede the pipe dreams of Linguistic Man. Archaic Humanity precedes Linguistic Man in the way that poetry precedes language. Poetry is not an archaic "form" of language any more than a storm is a "form" of weather. There were storms long before "weather", and there were lyrical root-moments for mankind long before the establishment of civilization as a language-centred construct.

The essence of language is the poetic, the essence of the poetic is the lyrical, and the essence of the lyrical is the musical movement of nature in and across silence. These pulsations in their turn have their roots in the most archaic of all experiences on this planet: the sensation of the primitive, free openness of geo-poetic space. When, as Professor of Poetics in the Univeristy of Paris IV, Kenneth White founds the *Institut International de Géo-poétque* in 1989, this event expresses a counter-intellectual need within the intellectual community of Europe: a desire to get back to poetic foundations. Such returns, as in the case of the Romantic movement two hundred years ago, are essential traits of the poetic life itself. Poetry cannot *not* return to its roots, poetics cannot *not* revolt against Linguistic Man, and a poetic root-manifesto cannot *not* involve itself with the geo-poetic.

In the return to the archaic and geo-poetic, and starting with Rousseau, the Romantics discovered the poetic roots of mankind as roots not simply