

A VINDICATION OF STRUGGLING NATURE:
MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S SCANDINAVIA

Anka Ryall
University of Tromsø

We should certainly be guilty of a gross absurdity if, in an age like the present, we were to enter into an elaborate definition of the advantages to be derived from the study of NATURAL HISTORY; the ancients recommended it as useful, instructive, and entertaining; and the moderns have so far pursued and cultivated this first of sciences, that it is now admitted to be the source of universal instruction and knowledge; where every active mind may find subjects to amuse and delight, and the artist a never failing field to enrich his glowing imagination.

J. S. Barr¹

In her travel narrative, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), the revolutionary author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) turned her attention to natural history. As Mary Wollstonecraft herself explains it, her engagement with natural history was an inevitable outcome of her sense of place: "Sweden appeared to me the country in the world most proper to form the botanist and natural historian: every object seemed to remind me of the creation of things, of the first efforts of sportive nature."² Partly a passing homage to the famous Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, this is primarily a statement of the author's textual identity. Like contemporary male travellers, she uses natural history in order to construct authoritative views of specific landscapes and to incorporate them into a global

¹ J. S. Barr, *Barr's Buffon: Buffon's Natural History* (London, 1792), v.

² *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Rpt. as *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 87. Further page references to this edition will be included in the text.

framework that reflects what Mary Louise Pratt calls the European "planetary consciousness."³ However, natural history is also a more personal imaginative resource. As my paper will attempt to demonstrate, and as Wollstonecraft's emphasis on the "creation of things" and "the first efforts of sportive nature" suggests, she endows her northern landscapes and organisms with an almost emancipatory potential that is analogous to her feminist vision of social change and personal empowerment. Hence her natural history of Scandinavia involves her in a critical dialogue with the major, officially recognized, eighteenth-century "systems" and "oeconomies" of nature. Indeed, I want to argue that she aligns herself with certain male and metropolitan natural histories both to undercut their complacent assertions and to coopt them for her own purposes.

Although, as Mary Poovey has noted, Mary Wollstonecraft's "typical relationship to nature suggests more of the eighteenth-century empiricist's fascination with details than a Wordsworthian appreciation of imaginative power,"⁴ it is easy, particularly for modern readers unfamiliar with the concepts and concerns of eighteenth-century natural history, to overlook the extent to which its discourses inform her view of Scandinavia. But her book was written at a time when the close connection between travel writing and natural history was taken for granted. According to Pratt, "[t]he authority of science was invested most directly in specialized descriptive texts," while travel narratives were accorded a secondary but important function as "essential mediators between the scientific network and a larger European public."⁵ Unlike many other eighteenth-century travel narratives, however, Wollstonecraft's *Letters* does not define itself as a scientific or systematic investigation. On the contrary, its approach is repeatedly characterized as "desultory"; its analysis, Wollstonecraft

³ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 29.

⁴ Mary Poovey, *The Proper Woman and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 90.

⁵ Pratt, *op.cit.*, 29.

writes, is the outcome of "such observations and reflections as the circumstances draw forth" (85). Natural history as a way of creating a sense of place merges with and is woven into other discourses – of aesthetics, of self-enquiry and of politics. My reading of the *Letters* is therefore an attempt to pull out one strand of a rich and complex tapestry. But, as I hope to indicate, this is a much more significant strand than has so far been acknowledged.

Wollstonecraft's deliberately personal and contingent approach has consequences for the *kind* of natural history she produces and, by extension, for the sense of place conveyed in the *Letters*. In the book's prefatory "advertisement" she explains that she has chosen an epistolary form rather than a more formal and retrospective arrangement of her experiences in Scandinavia, because "I perceived that I could not give a just description of what I saw, but by relating the effect different objects had produced on my mind and feelings, whilst the impression was still fresh" (62). In other words, she situates her knowledge claims by emphasizing not only her own subject position but the contingency of that position. Because she identifies travel writing as a form of personal and temporal action or, more specifically, as "an act of self-assertion,"⁶ her sense of place cannot be separated from her character or the personal circumstances of the journey. As she phrases it one of her book reviews: "The art of travelling is only a branch of the art of thinking, or still more precisely to express ourselves, the conduct of a being who acts from principle."⁷ It is therefore necessary to give a very brief summary of Wollstonecraft's personal circumstances at the time of her encounter with Scandinavia before we look at some of the passages dealing with "place."

When Mary Wollstonecraft travelled in Sweden, Denmark and Norway for three months during the summer of 1795, she was 36 years old. Three years previously her controversial *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* had made her a celebrity. After its

⁶ H. Porter Abbott, "Autobiography, Autography, Fiction: Groundwork for a Taxonomy of Textual Categories," *New Literary History* 19 (Spring 1988): 603.

⁷ *Analytical Review*, August 1790. Rpt. in *Works*, ed. by Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: Pickering, 1989), VII: 277.

publication she had lived in France, been an eye-witness to the terror, fallen in love, become a mother, been abandoned by her lover, attempted suicide and written her longest book, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin of the French Revolution* (1794), the first of a projected two-volume work. She set out on her journey across the North Sea and to what was then the very margins of the civilized world as a single woman with her one-year-old daughter Fanny and a French maid. The motive for this unusual and daring journey is uncertain. Per Nyström has argued that she travelled to conduct some business on behalf of her lover, the American entrepreneur Gilbert Imlay, who had been trading via Scandinavia to avoid the British blockade against France, in the hope that her assistance would revive their relationship.⁸ Since her travel book has the form of letters addressed, albeit obliquely, to Imlay, this is a likely explanation. Instead of suggesting the possibility of a reconciliation, however, the book traces the final unravelling of their relationship.

It is also possible that Wollstonecraft went along with Imlay's schemes primarily because she realized that her journey might provide her with material for a travel narrative. The great popularity and consequent sales potential of books of travel must have been a major consideration for a self-supporting single mother. In this context, as is obvious from contemporary reviews, Wollstonecraft's many references to her own situation – her loss, her sense of betrayal, her loneliness and despair – gave the narrative of her journey an added sentimental interest. However, read in conjunction with the posthumously published letters Wollstonecraft wrote to Imlay from Scandinavia during the summer of 1795, the travel book, which was written in an epistolary form after her return to England in October, shows the transmutation of an almost incoherent obsession into an intellectually manageable format, a feminized version of a Rousseau-inspired self-enquiry. Specifically, she casts herself as a "solitary wanderer" who, like Rousseau in *Les Rêveries du*

⁸ See Per Nyström, *Mary Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian Journey*, trans. by George R. Otter (Göteborg: Kungl. Vetenskaps- og Vitterhets-Samhället, 1980).

promeneur solitaire (1782), uses a temporary exile from society to explore what Wollstonecraft calls "the history of my own heart" (122).

In the present context, what this means is that Mary Wollstonecraft's observations of Scandinavia cannot be disentangled from the unhappy personal circumstances alluded to throughout the *Letters*. These circumstances define her epistemological standpoint. Emerging gradually in the course of her journey, Wollstonecraft's standpoint is based on a sense of connection between her own "mind and feelings" and the minds and feelings of other disenfranchised people, particularly women, whose "dependent and oppressed state" makes her worry constantly about her infant daughter's future (97). What she calls "my favourite subject of contemplation, the future improvement of the world" is thus not only a philosophical position but a pressing personal agenda (187). When she insists that this agenda does not detract from, but instead strengthens, the truth-value of her work, she anticipates Sandra Harding's claims for a feminist standpoint. A feminist epistemological standpoint, Harding writes, is "an interested social location ("interested" in the sense of "engaged," not "biased"), the conditions for which bestow upon its occupants scientific and epistemic advantage. The subjugation of women's sensuous, concrete, relational activity permits women to grasp aspects of nature and social life that are not accessible to inquiries grounded in men's characteristic advantages."⁹ Although, as a travel writer, Wollstonecraft asks "*men's questions*" (68), as a woman both cognizant of and implicated in the oppression of her "fellow-creatures" – the term she uses in the introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* – she claims to be able to produce knowledge that is potentially more complete, and consequently more "just" than that produced by men.

Nonetheless, behind Mary Wollstonecraft's account of Scandinavia lies the combined authority of the two great rivals of eighteenth-century natural history, Carl Linnaeus and his French contemporary Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon. My focus

⁹Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press: 1986), 148.

will be on the latter, because his work obviously provided the conceptual framework for her sense of place, while the importance of Linnaeus for her thinking about landscape was more local and specific. Though almost forgotten today except among specialists on the history of science, during the second half of the eighteenth century Buffon's entertaining and comprehensive 36-volume *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière* (1749-89) was a work every educated person knew. Buffon (who coined the phrase "the style is the man") was read and admired as writer equally "learned and eloquent."¹⁰ Eventually, as Londa Schiebinger has pointed out, when natural historians felt the need to dissociate themselves from "the tainted world of literature," his poetic style became suspect.¹¹ But many writers, like Buffon's British translator William Smellie, lamented the influence of Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*, on the ground that it made natural historians turn "from the great views of Nature to the humble ambition of system-making."¹² This was an opinion shared by Mary Wollstonecraft. In a review of Smellie's *Philosophy of Natural History* for the *Analytical* she dismisses natural histories in English "excepting the translation of Buffon's works, and Goldsmith's history of the earth" as "mere nomenclatures, dry materials."¹³

Wollstonecraft may have read Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* either in French or English, in which it was available in three extensive translations. The first, in 5 volumes, was published in 1775-76. This was superseded by William Smellie's much more authoritative 9-volume translation, first published in 1780-85 and several times reprinted, and a 15-volume translation by J. S. Barr, first published in 1792-93.¹⁴ Moreover, Wollstonecraft, like many

¹⁰ William Smellie, "Preface," to his translation of Comte de Buffon, *Natural History, General and Particular* (Edinburgh, 1780), I: xi.

¹¹ Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 154.

¹² Smellie, *op. cit.*, I: viii.

¹³ *Analytical Review*, October 1790; rpt. in *Works*, *op. cit.*, VII: 293.

¹⁴ According to John Lyon and Philip Sloan, *Barr's Buffon* "is the only English translation which remains closely faithful in detail to the French original," while Smellie's better-known and often reprinted translation "suffers from repeated editorial alterations and omissions which make it a

other readers, obviously also knew Buffon's work indirectly through Oliver Goldsmith's extremely popular 8-volume *History of the Earth and Animated Nature* (1774). Intending his work as "innocent amusement for those who have nothing else to employ them, or who require a relaxation from labour,"¹⁵ Goldsmith organizes his "history" on the basis of Buffon's but, in Smellie's words, "omits and patches according to his own fancy."¹⁶ In addition to such multi-volume versions, there were several abridgements for children, one of which was reviewed by Mary Wollstonecraft for the *Analytical* in January 1792. As late as in the 1860s, according to G. Bernard Shaw, every literate English child "knew Buffon's Natural History as well as Esop's Fables," a comment that deftly sums up the work's literary status.¹⁷

Peter Gay calls Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* a work whose "profusion . . . mirrored the lavish wealth of nature."¹⁸ As his "Initial Discourse" shows, however, Buffon – in spite of his ambitious title – was fully aware that the natural world would always exceed any attempt to account for it:

Natural history, in its fullest extent, is an immense subject. It embraces all objects which the universe displays to us. This prodigious multitude of quadrupeds, birds, fishes, insects, plants, minerals, etc., offers to the curiosity of the human mind a vast spectacle, the totality of which is so grand that it appears, and indeed is, inexhaustible in its details.¹⁹

text which must be used with care on finer points of interpretation" ("Introduction," *From Natural History to the History of Nature*, x). When Mary Wollstonecraft refers to "the translation of Buffon's works" in her review of Smellie's *Philosophy of Natural History* in October 1790, she obviously has Smellie's own translation in mind. I have therefore chosen to refer to this version of the *Histoire naturelle*.

¹⁵ Oliver Goldsmith, *An History of the Earth, and Animated Nature*, vol. 1 (London, 1774), xiv.

¹⁶ Smellie, *op.cit.*, I: xv.

¹⁷ G. Bernard Shaw, "Back to Methuselah," in *Prefaces* (London: Constable, 1934), 479.

¹⁸ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1969), II: 152.

¹⁹ Comte de Buffon, "Initial Discourse," trans. John Lyon. In John Lyon and Philip R. Sloan, eds., *From Natural History to the History of Nature*:

To summarize such an enormous work is obviously next to impossible. The *Histoire naturelle* is both an epic history of the world, starting with the formation of the earth and its geological development, and a species by species account of different animals presented in terms of their natural habitats. Originally it was to have been completed with volumes on invertebrates, microscopic animals and botany, but these were never written. Interspersed with the more descriptive sections are several systematic or theoretical sections, among them a treatise on the degeneration of animals, which starts with an explanation of the development over time of racial characteristics among humans as a result of migration. Other sections are devoted to analogies between animals and plants, and to the nature of man, a species Buffon places firmly among the animals.

Today we would say that Buffon represents an environmentalist position or even an environmental or "thermal" determinism.²⁰ In Buffon's view, all organisms, including humans, are the products of specific environmental conditions. Hence the true order of living nature cannot be found in any artificial system of classification, but only in the concrete processes of reproduction and change under varying circumstances. As he puts it in a section titled "Of the Varieties of the Human Species": "Three causes . . . must be admitted, as concurring in the production of . . . varieties . . . among the different nations of this earth: 1. The influence of climate; 2. Food, which has a great dependence on climate; and, 3. manners, on which climate has a still greater influence."²¹

Mary Wollstonecraft signals her allegiance to Buffon's totalizing vision of the history of nature in a variety of ways, most explicitly through the time frame she uses for her account of Scandinavia. Buffon starts his book with a section titled "The

Readings from Buffon and His Critics (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 97.

²⁰ The latter term is used by John H. Eddy, Jr. in "Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*: History? A Critique of Recent Interpretations," *Isis* 85 (1994): 660 .

²¹ Buffon, Comte de (Georges-Louis Leclerc), *Natural History, General and Particular*, trans. William Smellie (Edinburgh, 1780), III: 132. All further page references to this translation will be included in the text.

History and Theory of the Earth," because, as he explains, "[t]he general history of the earth ought to precede that of its productions" (I: 1). This was a pattern imitated by Goldsmith, who opens the first volume of his *History* with "a sketch of the universe." Wollstonecraft's historical imagination works in a similar way. Like Buffon, she starts with the geological formation of the earth. She makes her arrival in Sweden into an encounter with a landscape that reminds her of the moment of genesis:

There was a solemn silence in this scene, which made itself be felt. The sun-beams that played on the ocean, scarcely ruffled by the lightest breeze, contrasted with the huge, dark rocks . . . looked like the rude materials of creation forming the barrier of unwrought space. (65)

Though she seems to see the earth here in a moment of suspension, just before its formation, it is a focus on movement and change that characterizes her view of the landscape. Following Buffon, she consistently sees places in a temporal sense, suggesting their development over millions of years. She even surpasses him by imagining not only eventual decay but the possibility of a future extinction:

The view of this wild coast, as we sailed along it, afforded me a continual subject for meditation. I anticipated the future improvement of the world, and observed how much man had still to do, to obtain of the earth all it could yield. I even carried my speculations so far as to advance a million or two years to the moment when the earth would perhaps be so perfectly cultivated, and so completely peopled, as to render it necessary to inhabit every spot; yes; these bleak shores. Imagination went still farther, and pictured the state of man when the earth could no longer support him. Where was he to fly to from universal famine? Do not smile: I really became distressed for these fellow creatures, yet unborn. The image fastened on me, and the world appeared a vast prison. (130)

The vast time-scale here is Buffon's. By situating a specific landscape in terms of such far-reaching speculations about global

origins, developments and decline, Wollstonecraft not only incorporates Scandinavia in the world but asserts her own credentials as a natural historian.

Like other Enlightenment thinkers, Buffon attributes different racial features among humans to migration and subjection to different climates. As he phrases it in the section titled "Treatise on the Degeneration of Animals":

Whenever man began to change his climate, and migrate from one country to another, his nature was subjected to various alterations. In temperate countries, which we suppose to be adjacent to the place where he was originally produced, these alterations have been slight; but they have been augmented in proportion as he receded from this station. And, after many ages had elapsed; after he had traversed whole continents, and intermixed with races already degenerated by the influence of different climates etc. etc. (VII: 392)

Buffon's use of the term "degeneration" is not quite as derogatory as we might expect, because he later points out that "with regard to Nature, improvement and degeneration are the same thing; for they both imply an alteration of original constitution" (VII: 399). But when comparing the slight alterations of the original constitution of different organisms that take place over time in temperate countries with the much greater changes caused by exposure to more extreme climates, either hot or cold, he always locates his ideal forms in the temperate regions of Europe. There nature's productions "are always mild," he writes: "The softest and most wholesome herbs, the sweetest fruits, the gentlest animals, the most polished men, are peculiar to those happy climes" (IV: 69). The more distance from that centre, the more degeneration. Thus the New World produces more degeneration than the Old. In particular, Buffon cites consequences which "must be referred to the quality of the earth and atmosphere, to the degree of heat and moisture, to the situation and height of mountains, to the quantity of running and stagnant waters, to the extent of forests, and, above all, to the inert condition of Nature in that country" (V: 132).

Inertness is a key concept in Buffon's environmental determinism. It is usually linked to a lack of heat. Though Mary Wollstonecraft does not call it degeneration, she uses a related environmental determinism as a basis for her interpretation of the natural economy of Scandinavia and its influence on social developments. In "Letter Five," for example, she comments that "the manners of a people are best discriminated in the country. The inhabitants of the capital are all of the same genus; for the varieties in the species we must, therefore, search where the habitation of men are so separated as to allow the difference of climate to have its natural effect" (85). Her characterization of the people is grounded in a transposition of Buffon's analysis of the consequences of a cold climate to her Nordic landscapes, where, as she puts it, "[t]he current of life seemed congealed at the source" (88). This involves not only a consistent focus on the harsh and primitive aspects of the landscapes and its effect on the inhabitants, but repeated references to similarities with North America. Particularly in her first encounter with Sweden, she constructs Scandinavia as "a new world" populated by semi-savages determined by a cold climate and sterile landscape.

Wollstonecraft's emphatic use of references to aspects of inertia – such as brutishness, sluggishness, lack of exertion – to characterize these Swedes serves as a marker of her allegiance to Buffonian categories. In the *Histoire naturelle* Buffon uses a very similar language to describe the New World "savage." Indeed, Wollstonecraft's first images of the Scandinavians are remarkably close to his vision of native North Americans:

He has no vivacity, no activity of mind. The activity of his body is not so much an exercise of spontaneous motion, as a necessary action produced by want. Destroy his appetite for victuals and drink, and you will annihilate the active principle of all his movements: He remains in stupid repose, on his limbs or couch, for whole days. It is easy to discover the cause of the scattered life of savages, and of their estrangement from society. They have been refused the most precious spark of Nature's fire: They have no ardour for women, and, of course, no love to mankind. Unacquainted with most lively and most

tender of all attachments, the other sensations of their nature are cold and languid. (V: 130)

There is, however, one important difference. Although Mary Wollstonecraft uses congruent terms about the Scandinavians, she destabilizes their truth-value by suggesting their connection with her own standpoint, which at the outset is clearly affected by a fear and anxiety caused not only by the encounter with the unknown but by a sense of female vulnerability. Unlike Buffon, who "sees" the whole globe with equal clarity and detachment from his position in its symbolic centre, Wollstonecraft presents her evaluations as part of a narrative process in which her own standpoint is continually readjusted.

These readjustments are particularly obvious in "Letter One," where her arrival in Sweden is narrated through a whole series of attempts to land. When the book opens, the ship she has sailed on from England lies becalmed off the coast, and she therefore persuades the captain to let some sailors row her ashore. First they land by a "wretched hut," where they are given further directions by two old men "[s]carcely human in their appearance" (64). Then they row into a picturesque bay where there is no sign of human life. From a boat they are then directed into a bay where there is a pilot's hut. And again they see people who seem to exist in an almost animal state of nature: "men who remain so near the brute creation, as only to exert themselves to find the food necessary to sustain life, have little or no imagination to call forth the curiosity necessary to fructify the faint glimmerings of mind which entitles them to rank as lords of creation. – Had they either, they could not contentedly remain rooted in the clods they so indolently cultivate" (65). Without attempting to go ashore and approach the men, Wollstonecraft compounds the distance between herself and them by temporalizing it. The landing is transformed into an encounter between a primitive race and a representative of metropolitan civilization.

As Johannes Fabian has pointed out, "coevalness" or "Gleichzeitigkeit" is a necessary precondition for communication. In the *Letters* what Fabian calls "shared time" is not established until

the fourth attempt at landing.²² Wollstonecraft and her companions finally go ashore and are greeted by a hospitable pilot and his wife. When she crosses the threshold of a cottage instead of observing it from the boat, she finds "a clean house, with some degree of rural elegance" (66). The intimacy that ensues breaks down the temporal and physical distance between the travellers and the natives. In light of the mutual sympathy achieved in the fourth encounter, Wollstonecraft's response during the three first attempts at landing can now be redefined in terms of anxiety and fear of the unknown. Distance promotes pleasure only when an empty landscape can be aestheticized by viewing it pictorially (as in the entrance of the picturesque bay). It is worth noting that while all the three first encounters are defined by a distant and totalizing gaze (like Buffon's), the fourth involves both verbal dialogue (the pilot speaks English), mutual observation (his wife examines the visitors' clothes), and the exchange of smiles and gestures.

It is a sign of Buffon's great cultural influence that the act of referring to him and then, at some point, taking issue with him or modifying his views to one's own ends, as Wollstonecraft does here, served as an important way of manifesting personal and collective identities during the late eighteenth century. Perhaps the best-known example of such deliberate political use of Buffon is Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787).²³ Writing as both a politician and naturalist, Jefferson takes strong exception to what he calls Buffon's "proud theory."²⁴ From his superior Old-World perspective, Buffon claims that in the New World "animated Nature is weaker, less active, and more circumscribed in the variety of her productions" than in the Old (V: 115), because the miasmatic and degenerate conditions of the American environment "can only afford nourishment to cold men and feeble animals" (V: 136).

²² Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 30-31.

²³ I would like to thank Lee Sterrenburg not only for drawing my attention to Thomas Jefferson's *Notes*, but for suggesting its relevance for a reading of Mary Wollstonecraft's political use of Buffonian natural history.

²⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 65.

Among the evidence Jefferson marshals on behalf of the New World to counteract this is a table of the comparative weights of animals in Europe and America. He also makes a point of attacking Buffon's view that Native Americans are debilitated products of "an unprolific land" (V: 129), and cites the existence of big North American creatures, such as the mammoth, that "should have sufficed to rescue the earth it inhabited, and the atmosphere it breathed, from the imputation of impotence."²⁵ Jefferson's disagreement with Buffon, which he develops at length in his "query" on "Productions Mineral, Vegetable and Animal," was an important statement of national worth and identity.

From her own – very differently located – radical standpoint, Mary Wollstonecraft lodges an equivalent protest. Although, like Jefferson, she pays homage to Buffon by using his concepts to underpin her own interpretation and appreciation of a particular national landscape, she does so in a way that challenges or even subverts these same concepts. Specifically, she revises Buffon's theories about environmental influences as a way of affirming her own – and, by extension, women's – worth and emancipatory potential. To illustrate this, I want to look at some passages that deal with the growth of organisms in northern soil. Wollstonecraft, like Buffon, is interested in the boundless productivity of organic nature as distinguished from non-organic nature. Buffon uses the terms living and dead matter (II: 36). Though obviously agreeing with the great naturalist that in a "dead" landscape living matter meets great obstacles, Wollstonecraft moves towards a different interpretation of the consequences of those obstacles. Instead of seeing only degeneration caused by a "rude clime" (99), she is attentive to how certain organisms proliferate anyway, against the odds. Her focus is on plants, specifically certain small flowers and young trees, and these are "politicized" in a way that recasts the social analysis she had developed earlier in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

In the *Letters* Wollstonecraft's social analysis is based on analogies between different organic life forms that serve to

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

humanize natural objects and naturalize humans.²⁶ Though they have always been common in science, the unavoidable "imperfection" of such analogies, as Agnes Arber has pointed out, "sets them in the boundary region of scientific thought, where they can act as connecting links with other areas of experience."²⁷ In other words, they are the place where science and literature meet. Mary Wollstonecraft's interest in this kind of analogical reasoning is signalled in her review of William Smellie's *Philosophy of Natural History* (1790), where she takes issue with his rejection of Linnaeus' sexual system of plant classification. "Why is it of such importance to *emancipate us from the fetters of a system* respecting the vegetable kingdom?" she asks. "Can the discovery of a general law, an intelligible as well as beautiful analogy, stop the progress of enquiry, and sit heavily on the mind?"²⁸ As Alan Bewell, Londa Schiebinger and Ann Shteir have shown, Linnaeus' accounts in the *Systema naturae* of the sexual reproduction of plants transformed the widely accepted biological analogies between plants and animals into social analogies. This happens when plant fertilization, for instance, is called a *nuptiae plantarum* or plant marriage. In Schiebinger's words, Linnaeus reads plants "through the lens of social relations in such a way that the new language of botany incorporated fundamental aspects of the social world as much as those of the natural world."²⁹ According to Bewell, "a wide analogical thoroughfare was built between plants and humans."³⁰

Wollstonecraft's interest in botanical analogies must be seen in light of the status of botany as the branch of natural history particularly appropriate for women. One reason for this was the conventional identification between flowers and women. In the British Linnaean Thomas Martyn's widely read translation of

²⁶ See Poovey, op. cit., 89.

²⁷ Agnes Arber, "Analogy in the History of Science," in M. F. Ashley Montagu, ed., *Studies and Essays in the History of Science and Learning Offered in Homage to George Sarton* (New York: Kraus, 1969), 233.

²⁸ *Analytical Review*, October 1790. In *Works*, op.cit., 7: 296.

²⁹ Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 17.

³⁰ Alan Bewell, "'Jacobin Plants': Botany and Social Theory in the 1790s," *The Wordsworth Circle* 20 (Summer 1989): 134.

Rousseau's botanical letters, *Letters on the Elements of Botany* (1785), for example, the woman botanist is imagined as "busy with her glass examining heaps of flowers, a hundred times less flourishing, less fresh, and less agreeable than herself."³¹ As Ann Shteir points out, by the late eighteenth century this symbolic identification had made botany "part of the social construction of femininity," and middle- and upper-class women were consequently encouraged to study plants not only "as a fashionable form of leisure," but "as an intellectual pursuit rewarding in itself."³² Indeed, Wollstonecraft herself makes this recommendation in *A Vindication*.

When Wollstonecraft exploits the "analogical thoroughfare" between plants and humans in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she does so not to naturalize conventional customs and the existing social order but to ground her social critique in nature. As Bewell demonstrates, her text turns horticultural discourse on "luxurians" (plants cultivated to increase their beauty with the consequence that they became sterile and susceptible to disease) into a theory of culture that explains the social construction of contemporary femininity. In Wollstonecraft's view, male "gyneculture" (Bewell's term) as applied to women is represented in "a false system of education" that causes "barren blooming":

for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased the fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season which they ought to have arrived at maturity.³³

To replace this artificial culture, Wollstonecraft proposes a system of education in which women's "faculties [will] have room to

³¹ Thomas Martyn, *Letters on the Elements of Botany: Addressed to a Lady* (London, 1794), 32.

³² Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England, 1760-1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 36.

³³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 79.

unfold, and their virtues to gain strength."³⁴ It is a system patterned on nature and stimulating healthy growth in a nurturing soil or environment.

In the *Letters* Mary Wollstonecraft incorporates the study of plants into her Buffonian interpretation of the landscape. At the same time she develops, extends and personalizes the concept of an emancipatory "gynoculture" by focusing on the tiny flowers she often observes between the rocks:

Straying further, my eye was attracted by the sight of some heart's ease that peeped through the rocks. I caught at it as a good omen, and going to preserve it in a letter that had not conveyed balm to my heart, a cruel remembrance suffused my eyes; but it passed away like an April shower.

...

Rocks were piled on rocks, forming a suitable bulwark to the ocean. Come no further, they emphatically said, turning their dark sides to the waves to augment the idle roar. The view was sterile: still little patches of earth, of the most exquisite verdure, enamelled with the sweetest wild flowers, seemed to promise the goats and a few straggling cows luxurious herbage. How silent and peaceful was the scene. I gazed around with rapture, and felt more of that spontaneous pleasure which gives credibility to our expectations of happiness, than I had for a long, long time before. I forgot the horrors I had witnessed in France, which cast a gloom over all nature. (67-68)

If the "barren blooming" of the luxuriant represents a discarded femininity associated with a decadent court culture, these tiny wild plants provide a natural and healthy, if rudimentary, counterpoint.

Thomas Martyn, in his translation of Rousseau's botanical letters, likewise characterizes the heart's ease or pansy as "the universal favourite of the more simple unrefined ages."³⁵ In contrast to Wollstonecraft, however, he compares it unfavourably with cultivated varieties:

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁵ Martyn, *op.cit.*, 405-6.

When we compare the diminutive and almost colourless Pansy, which we find among the corn, with the ample rich-coloured corella, that boasts the tissue of velvet, such as we see in some curious gardens; we cannot but allow that human art has made considerable improvement; and we survey it with more pleasure because it is not at the expense of the natural character of the flower; and you may enjoy it both as a botanist and a florist.³⁶

For Wollstonecraft the pansy does not need improvement. Its adaptation to a seemingly barren landscape represents the possibility of life, growth, culture and progress – even under adverse circumstances. In this sense it also embodies Wollstonecraft's hopes for her fatherless infant daughter, who is repeatedly described as a little plant.

To conceptualize the relationship between northern organisms and their harsh environments, Wollstonecraft refers to the notion of a universal "struggle for existence." This was a commonplace in eighteenth-century natural history,³⁷ but she gives it a personal and positive inflection. For comparison, William Smellie's Buffonian summary of the causes of death and decay (other than old age) may stand as representative of the conventional view:

It is an invariable law of Nature, that all organized bodies should have a constant tendency to dissolution. . . . Previous to actual resolution, plants and animals are subject to a number of analogous affections and diseases. When over-heated, plants show evident marks of languor and fatigue: Their leaves become flaccid, their stems and branches bend toward the earth, their juices evaporate, and their whole texture assumes the appearances of weakness and decay. The application of too great a degree of cold makes the flowers, the leaves, the bark, and even the woody fibres, shrivel and contract in their dimensions. When deprived of proper light and air, their colours fade, and they soon acquire a lurid and

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 406.

³⁷ See Barry G. Gale, "Darwin and the Concept of a Struggle for Existence: A Study of the Extrascientific Origins of Scientific Ideas," *Isis* 63 (1972): 321-344.

sickly aspect. They are likewise subject to be starved for want of nourishment. The growth of plants, as well as that of animals, is checked by scanty supplies of food. When the soil or situation is unkindly, vegetables are always weak and dwarfish, and their prolific powers are diminished. They may also be poisoned by the absorption of fluids hostile to their constitution. Beside these general affections, common to the plant and animal, vegetables are injured, and often killed, by particular diseases.³⁸

For Buffon, and for Smellie, temperate climates create better organisms, while they degenerate under exposure to more extreme climates, either hot or cold. This represents exactly the kind of negative environmental determinism that Wollstonecraft seems to object to. In the *Letters* she turns it around by redefining the consequences of an organism's exposure to destruction, time and extremity in the form of "unkindly" environments. Instead of causing degeneration, the need to struggle, as in the passage about the heart's ease, may produce strength and vitality. Even if the hope she invests in struggling organisms suggests a personal involvement, her argument is couched in terms of an alternative naturalist explanation.

Here, again, is Smellie: "When the soil or situation is unkindly, vegetables are always weak and dwarfish, and their prolific powers are diminished." And here is Wollstonecraft's view of a northern landscape:

I have often mentioned the grandeur, but I feel myself unequal to the task of conveying an idea of the beauty and elegance of the scene when the spiral tops of the pines are loaded with ripening seed, and the sun gives a glow to their light green tinge, which is changing into purple, one tree more or less advanced, contrasting with another. The profusion with which nature has decked them, with pendant honours, prevents all surprise at seeing, in every crevice, some sapling struggling for existence. Vast masses of stone are thus encircled; and roots,

³⁸ William Smellie, *The Philosophy of Natural History* (Edinburgh, 1790), 41.

torn up by the storms, become a shelter for a young generation.
(152)

What Wollstonecraft describes is a harsh environment that does not in any way diminish the "prolific powers" of organisms such as pine trees. Though the saplings "struggling for existence" among the roots of dead trees are very small, they are neither weak nor dwarfish, and will in time become fully grown trees "loaded with ripening seeds." Thus she suggests that adaptation to harsh conditions fosters hearty and invigorated organisms. The struggling northern organisms do not only provide empirical evidence that undercuts the complacent assertions of metropolitan natural history. They also provide an opportunity for a symbolical identification that recodes struggling nature as an analogy of Wollstonecraft's own struggles and precarious but triumphant survival. This happens because the notion of struggling growth in a seemingly barren landscape connects the saplings to her own history, which has been determined, she explains to her correspondent, by "the struggles . . . occasioned by the oppressed state of my sex" (171). In other words, there is no contradiction in her text between the production of a valid natural history and an interested epistemological standpoint.

But the seed, so to speak, of Mary Wollstonecraft's saplings is Buffon's insistence on what he calls nature's "greater bias towards life than death." To illustrate the unlimited productivity of nature, he presents the reader with a calculation of "what may be produced by a single germ":

The seed of an elm, which weighs not above the hundredth part of an ounce, will, in 100 years, form a tree, of which the mass will amount to ten cubic fathoms. But, at the tenth year, this elm will have produced 1000 seeds, each of which, in 100 years more, will consist of ten cubic fathoms. Thus, in the space of 110 years, more than 10,000 cubic fathoms of organized matter are produced. Ten years after, we shall have ten million of fathoms, without including the annual increase of 10,000 which would amount to 100,000 more; and in ten years more, the number of cubick [sic] fathoms would be 10,000,000,000,000.

Hence, in 130 years, a single germ would produce a mass of organized matter equal to 1000 cubic leagues; for a cubic league contains only about 10,000,000,000 cubic fathoms. Ten years after, this mass would be increased to a thousand times a thousand leagues, or one million of cubic leagues; and in ten more it would amount to 1,000,000,000,000 cubic leagues; so that, in the space of 150 years, the whole globe might be converted into organized matter of a single species. Nature would know no bounds in the production of organized bodies, if her progress were not obstructed by matter which is not susceptible of organization; and this is a full demonstration that she has no tendency to increase brute matter; that her sole object is the multiplication of organized beings; and that, in this operation, she never stops but when irresistible obstacles occur. (II: 35-36)

Left to itself, Buffon's powerful nature has almost no limits. Cast in terms of such prophetic calculations, a naturalist version of the biblical parable of the mustard seed, Wollstonecraft's tiny saplings become an extremely potent, almost explosive, analogy of human potential.

Ultimately, then, Mary Wollstonecraft's observations of struggling but undefeated northern organisms provide the opportunity for a symbolical identification that recodes them in terms of social and individual rebellion. In other words, there is no contradiction in Wollstonecraft's *Letters* between the production of a valid natural history, an affirmative sense of place and another "Vindication."

* * *

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