



Miszelle

In Excess: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Sublime Feminine Subject

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Romanticism, transcendent reaction to Enlightenment rationalism, might be understood as a discourse of excess in both senses of the word: *abundance* and *surplus*. While both definitions concern themselves with a boundary line—a set of constraints, whether permitted, prescribed, or desired—the difference between them is ultimately one of perspective and valuation. In the sense of abundance, excess is experienced as a wealth *within* the bounded space, a feeling of having too much of something for a particular set of constraints. As a *surplus*, on the other hand, excess exists within this same space only as an imagined, excluded element, rendered valueless by its position *beyond* the constraints—unless, that is, one shifts perspective and transcends the limits which so define it. The values, philosophies, and tropes of Romanticism emerged in the eighteenth-century European imagination from the German *Sturm und Drang* movement, to counter a growing Enlightenment rationalism. Rational discourse provided a language for (and therefore emphasized engagement with) measurable elements, establishing predictable structures with which to map the tangible world. It lent itself not only to an accrual of an *abundance* of certain kinds of knowledge, but to systems—proto-capitalism foremost among them—operating through currencies of quantifiable use-values toward a goal of unrestrained excess. Romantic discourse emerged to describe the surplus, what rational language excluded and which therefore existed in excess of expression: namely the subjective, metaphysical realities of individual life.

To do so, Romantic artists and writers embraced excess, both in terms of abundance and surplus, by disrupting boundaries. Symmetrical structures and geometric lines gave way to the rough asymmetries of Capability Brown's English landscapes, from crumbling ruins to serpentine walks; Caspar David Friedrich's jagged mountainscapes and storm-ridden horizons; and William Wordsworth's seemingly endless leisure and his free poetic form.¹ Grand Tours took young men beyond the bounds of customary social circles to experience the disorienting effects of temporary displacement: the sublimity of alpine

¹ Though not wealthy, Wordsworth was a member of the upper class and could afford to spend long hours walking in nature and composing poems. He departed from traditional emphasis on 'elevated' language and rigid rhyme schemes, preferring to compose his poetry with 'common' speech and freer form. Howarth, Peter. *The Wordsworth Circle*, Vol. 34, No. 1, Wordsworth's „Second Selves“ 1789-2002: Essays Delivered At Lancaster University, August, 2002 (Winter, 2003), pp. 44-48

vistas, spare limits of polar landscapes, and temporal vertigo of Roman ruins. In a fast industrializing world, where calculation and mechanization processes occupied increasing territory outside and in, such wild unassailable peripheries served as powerful correlatives to interior emotional landscapes excluded and repressed. Romantic art, literature, and landscapes emerged out of non-utilitarian indulgence in an abundance of time, space and leisure. Where rational discourse fenced in and formalized forms of tangible value, Romanticism restored the currency of feeling and the subjective imagination by surrendering to its most intense, unrestrained—*excessive*—forms. Romantic values, practices, and tropes—particularly the sublime—transcended spatial, temporal, aesthetic bounds to retrieve what existed in excess of them.

Yet, much like Enlightenment, Romantic discourse was not available to everyone. Boundaries of gender, race, and class divided aesthetic accessibility: the leisure, education, and freedom of bodily and psychological movement required for Romantic cliffside encounters, Grand Tours of the continent, and full access to the varied tropes and texts of Romanticism were generally only available to wealthy, white men. For women, who were excluded from public life and considered incapable of intense sophisticated emotion and rigorous intellect, areas of Romantic discursive territory remained out of bounds. In general, the ideological and discursive constraints placed on a woman excluded aspects of human subjectivity; she must always contend with severe imposed limits, a sense of self filling and straining against them, and the inaccessible excess beyond—a state of simultaneous abundance *and* surplus, of occupying a position within and outside of the boundary.² Women, confined to the private space of the home, relied primarily on their relation to men—fathers, brothers, and, in particular, husbands—as their primary means of engaging with public life and discourse and the aspects of self rendered accessible therein. Of course, these relationships granted limited access only under their own restrictive conditions: Lacan tells us that feminine desire is always constructed in terms of the desire of the other.

2 This excluded element resembles Lacan's concept of feminine *jouissance* in "God and the *Jouissance* of The Woman: A Love Letter" (Lacan, Jacques, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jaqueline Rose. *Feminine Sexuality: Jacan Lacan and the École Freudienne*. New York: W.W. Norton. 1982. Print.)

3 Wollstonecraft, Mary, Ed. Carol H. Poston. *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, Denmark*. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press. 1976. Print.

In her travelogue, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, Denmark*, Mary Wollstonecraft appropriates masculine Romantic tropes in order to access for herself and her readers this "feminine excess".³ Wollstonecraft's fierce political writings championing women's rights emerged from painful personal circumstances. A failed relationship with American ex-pat Gilbert Imlay, which left her unmarried with a child, threatened her with, not only dire economic straits and social exile, but a loss of the selfhood she had established through this relationship. Though highly critical of Imlay's capitalist excess—both in terms of his smuggling and war profiteering during the French Revolution and his relations with women—Wollstonecraft travelled north in the summer of 1795 in search of reparations for his doubly-stolen silver, pilfered from him months previously by Norwegian pirates. Though this treasure trove of capitalist exploitation was ostensibly her end-goal, what she sought in actuality was his recognition of *her* value. In other words, she set out to purchase her full subjectivity through his chosen currency, with the intention of transmuting the silver through the process of searching for it into more constructive material. In

a riddle that unsolves itself, the answer here exists as a remainder, one already excluded from the question. Her quest to retrieve her own twice-stolen surplus through Imlay's recognition, much like the missing silver, was doomed from the start. Instead, arriving at the end of her journey, with no Imlay to meet her, she undertakes her second suicide attempt. Surviving, she returns to the search in-text, looking to a transcendent Romanticism to free herself.

Upon her return and recovery, she revised her letters to Imlay, written during the journey, and published the result in what would become her most popular work during her lifetime, one which took hold of the Romantic imagination. The text reveals a woman embracing Romantic excess in all its forms: indulgent leisure, spatial and temporal abundance. Moving beyond the "polished circles" (90) of urban England, she travelled into a wild, peripheral north: spending long hours napping in fields or wandering aimlessly; viewing rugged coastline and endless horizon from ship's rail and shoreline; peering over cliff and down into thundering cascade. Much like her male counterparts perambulating their alpine perimeters, Wollstonecraft transgresses society's limits and travels to world's edge to access, through the infinite sense of space and time, the emotion that has been excluded from the rational language of calculation, to restore its social value. And yet Wollstonecraft is doing something *more*. Simply by travelling to such spaces as a woman and using these tropes, she exists in excess of social, temporal and geographic constraints placed on the feminine subject. She compels the discourse of Romanticism beyond its own limit. As she leisurely indulges in an afternoon nap in a meadow, fearing "no rude satyr's approach" (73), she actively counteracts the common presumption of the time that a woman alone in nature must be promiscuous, makes a dissident claim to that promiscuity, and wages a silent war on any "satyr" that threatens to keep her indoors. When accessed by the feminine subject, the image of bodily repose in nature, imbued with Romantic beauty and leisure, transcends its own poetic function and becomes revolutionary in its excess.

4 Generally this meant spatial confinement, restricted movement, and temporal control through rigid scheduling, sedation, etc. All forms of careful containment of such frightening displays of excess. Showalter, E. (1987). *The female malady, women, madness, and english culture, 1830-1980*. Viking Pr.

More than any other trope, the sublime answers Wollstonecraft's need for a recognition and revaluing of, not only emotion, but the full feeling capacity of the feminine subject. She and her fellow male Romantics all spend long hours on rocky outcrops overwhelmed by sublime emotion, but where the men might feel secure in the ready transmutation of their melancholic genius into art, Wollstonecraft must contend in her writing with a readership preconditioned by medical discourse to diminish such intense emotion in women with diagnoses of "hysteria" or "madness" and seek to "heal"—that is, control or repress—it by committing her.⁴ Through her mastery of Romantic discourse, Wollstonecraft manages the near impossible: to represent her experience of the sublime—transgress, in other words, into masculine discursive territory—without excluding herself from mainstream society in the eyes of her readers. It is here, at cascade's edge, that Wollstonecraft feels the full force of her compromised subject position, at the mercy of a 'capitalist lover' intent on accruing objects (not subjects). Wollstonecraft is not the only suicidal sublime in the Romantic repertoire. William Godwin—one time rival, later husband—compares her *Letters* to Goethe's *Werther*. But where Werther peers down into the roaring chasm of his sublime spurned love and succumbs to death, Wollstonecraft—as woman—inhabits the same space from a different perspective.

We might understand Wollstonecraft's sublime descriptions as her answer to the aforementioned riddle of the silver and the suicidal love. Where Wollstonecraft, restricted by dominant conventions and discourses, must experience her subjectivity as perpetual *excess*—both too abundant for the confining space of allowable self *and* in large part excluded from it. Where Wollstonecraft attempts to transcend such limits through the recognition of a male Subject, in a culture in which she, as woman, is continually positioned (body and mind) as object of his desire. Where her lover's capitalist ambitions now threaten her existence. Where she sets out to recoup his love and her value by following the money. Where she understands, finally, that much like the silver spent elsewhere, this "love" will not materialize. Where Wollstonecraft finds herself at the edge of a cascade, contemplating a jump.

Wollstonecraft's travels in the north were bookended by two thwarted suicide attempts—first a lethal dose of laudanum prevented by Imlay, and then an icy swim in the River Thames interrupted by a boatful of fishermen. They indicate a woman, not driven to hysterical excess by a weak mind, but rather denied access to her own mind—an existence tantamount to living death—by imposed social and discursive limits. After she is dragged back into life, Wollstonecraft turns to language to transcend her position, requesting her love letters back from Imlay and revising them into the travelogue. Here, as her "unnamed You", Imlay exceeds himself, no longer a single flawed individual but a reading public with potential for cumulative transformation. Here, in the sublime rush, the image of death transcends itself and becomes poetic capital with which to gain purchase on a fuller subject position.

"Will you go with me to the cascade," she asks her reader. The approach is desolate, "rugged", "dreary", "entirely bare", a forest fire having ravaged the landscape some years before. "The devastation must, indeed, be terrible," she writes, "when this, literally speaking, wild fire, runs along the forest, flying from top to top, and crackling amongst the branches. The soil, as well as the trees, is swept away by the destructive torrent; and the country, despoiled of beauty and riches, is left to mourn for ages." As she "looks with pain on the ridge of rocks that stretched far beyond [her] eye, formerly crowned with the most beautiful verdure," her reader perceives a razed interior landscape. But the image of pure destruction gives way to a psyche struggling to emerge, budding with life and decay. Here language falls short. She finds herself

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...in every crevice, some sapling struggling for existence...roots torn up by the storms, become a shelter for a young generation. The pine and fir woods...paths not entangled with fallen leaves, which are only interesting whilst they are fluttering between life and death. The grey cobweb-like appearance of the aged pines...a much finer image of decay, the fibres whitening as they lose their moisture, imprisoned life seems to be stealing away. 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. (131-2).

Her fluttering between life and death subsides as she enters the sublime space:

Reaching the cascade, or rather cataract, the roaring of which had a long time announced its vicinity, my soul was hurried by the falls into a new train of reflections. The impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent from the dark cavities which mocked the exploring eye, produced an equal activity in my mind: my thoughts darted from earth to heaven, and I asked myself why I was chained to life and its misery? 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. (132-33)

Here, under Wollstonecraft's pen, the sublime experience in-text transcends itself, becomes revolutionary. She reconstructs the very trope whose exclusion of her stands in for the social and discursive restrictions which have driven her to the edge. Here, images of crackling fire intertwine with the roaring cascade; this dual current becomes the currency with which she can access her excess, envision an unbounded self. The destructive-constructive torrents give shape to the unspeakable excess of her experience as woman, both in terms of its abundance and surplus. Rather than simply expressing an inaccessible interiority through direct resonance, this image of the fall - "its dark cavities which mocked the exploring eye", shadows which exist in excess of her ability to fully perceive or describe them—crucially resists discursive control and confinement. The power of these elements is their existence beyond language. They make possible the impossible: as she reaches out her hand "to eternity, the dark speck of life to come", she gestures toward a future in which limits may be transcended; in doing so, death transmutes into infinity, and she briefly transcends the limits. It is here, precisely in the *abundance* and excess perceived in the image, its sublime resistance to descriptive enclosure, that Wollstonecraft accesses her sublime - uncontainable, infinite - feminine subjectivity.

The torrent of fire reemerges in the final letters, having swept through Copenhagen thanks to the rigid, close-packed and overcrowded infrastructure of the impoverished sectors of the city. With no Imlay there to meet her, she wanders the incinerated space alone, bearing witness to the broken structures around her. These final images and her epigraph, which tells us that social change must take place through the "growth of each particular soil" [my ital] (198), reveal her vision. In her sublime union of the elements, Wollstonecraft transcends the limits of transcendent Romantic discourse, drawing her readers to the outer limit of their imagination, to its very edge, to peer into the depths, witness the sublime torrent of the full feminine subject, and dare them to jump.

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