This paper considers how Mary Wollstonecraft revises a popular aesthetic of the late eighteenth century: the picturesque. Wollstonecraft effectively offers readers pedagogical lessons and inquiries by way aesthetic delineations. It is well-established that she forcefully deconstructs and transgresses aesthetic boundaries in her writing. Wollstonecraft’s persuasive language often questions socio-economic powers and cultural practices which frequently marginalized individuals in eighteenth-century England. While many scholars look at the politics of Wollstonecraft’s discourse, one area that must be examined more fully is how she utilizes aesthetic terminology to enlighten readers about human understanding.

Wollstonecraft’s aesthetics challenge set social codes by offering instructional alternatives to the cultural tastes and concomitant ideologies of her day. Using the picturesque, Wollstonecraft advances an empirical study on the symbiotic relationship between exteriority and interiority. She stages a hermeneutic analysis of how external paradigms and internal persuasions mutually condition and often determine the state of an individual’s material and psychological well-being. The world at large and the inner self are for Wollstonecraft like texts to be scrutinized and discussed in exegetic writing. She thus engineers her aesthetic discourse to foreground reflections on how individual agency, environment, and circumstantial (dis)advantages impact the development and progress of human subjects. An analysis of Wollstonecraft’s use of picturesque tropes in her children’s book, *Original Stories*, and her epistolary travelogue, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, illustrates how she composes aesthetic prose for instructive measure. In both texts, Wollstonecraft adapts her picturesque descriptions to
present an educative sequence of images and stories that cogently define how exterior and interior domains come to be cultivated.
DEDICATION

For my parents, my brother, and Matthew
BIOGRAPHY

Born and raised in Northern Virginia, Meredith Allen is the daughter of Lynne and Larry Allen and sister to Sam Allen. She holds a Bachelor of Music from Ithaca College, New York where she studied classical piano with Phiroze Mehta and allowed her passion for the written word to grow. Her curiosity about eighteenth and nineteenth-century English literature brought her to North Carolina State University. She looks forward to translating her interest of aesthetic mediums—both in language and music—into meaningful pedagogy.
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INTRODUCTION

Aesthetic Cultivations: Wollstonecraft’s “Taste for the Picturesque”

In his *Memoirs* on Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin writes of his late wife: “We had cultivated our powers . . . in different directions; I chiefly an attempt at logical and metaphysical distinction, she a taste for the picturesque” (272). Wollstonecraft’s “taste for the picturesque” varied however from that of her contemporary writers. Her aesthetic depictions offer not only a close study of landscape features, but also personal reflections on the inhabitants and surrounding circumstances that affect the residential quality of life. She opposed the distanced and aloof mode of travelers oft enraptured by effusive sentimentalism or guided only by negligible calculations which overlooked the economic, material, or socio-political state of regions visited. Thus, in her own picturesque delineations, Wollstonecraft presents a model that departs from the aesthetic discourse of her late eighteenth-century cohorts.

Wollstonecraft’s appropriation of aesthetic terms, in addition to her own radical thinking, ran counter to conventional ideas, trends, and assumptions current to late eighteenth-century culture. It is well-established that she forcefully deconstructs aesthetic boundaries in her writing. Her repudiation of Burke in the opening lines of the *Vindication of the Rights of Man* clearly demonstrates her ability at such rhetorical puncture: “[F]or truth, in morals, has ever appeared to me the essence of the sublime; and, in taste, simplicity the only criterion of the beautiful” (*WMW*, 5.7). Wollstonecraft disrupts aesthetic terms throughout her discourse to underscore the arbitrary nature of hierarchical distinctions, social privileges, and ideological customs instituted in the body politic. As demonstrated in both of her *Vindications*, Wollstonecraft often employs a
specific language and rhetoric to question cultural powers and practices which frequently marginalized individuals in society. Her aesthetic style indeed invokes political conviction as she urges readers to re-evaluate socio-economic paradigms that shape opportunities and knowledge. Yet what makes Wollstonecraft’s aesthetic discourse political is its pedagogical nature. Her aesthetics in their paradigmatic transgressions challenge set social codes by offering an instructional alternative to the cultural tastes and concomitant ideologies of her day. While Wollstonecraft’s politics desire specific social change, she achieves that change by first educating readers with critical reflections on the relationship between external conditions and internal consequences.

Discussion of Wollstonecraft’s aesthetics as a “politically situated” domain certainly appears throughout literary criticism (Bohls 142). Gary Kelly, for example, views Wollstonecraft as a “professional intellectual” woman, “relishing the ‘picturesque’ and the sublime yet determined in action . . . [and] able to ‘read’ both the landscape and the people,” as demonstrated in *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (191). Elizabeth Bohls, however, finds Wollstonecraft’s discourse an “aggressively anti-aesthetic” reconstruction of the aesthetic object and subject (155). Wollstonecraft invests picturesque sites with economic and physical realities in her *Letters*, comments Bohls, while she converts the “disinterested,” “detached” subject of eighteenth-century travel writing into a “highly individualized persona,” empathetic yet mindful, with a “complex interiority” (158-59). Jeanne Moskal adds that maternal affection “forms the conceptual center” of Wollstonecraft’s revised version of the picturesque (264). Fertility, Moskal suggests, becomes a major theme in Wollstonecraft’s aestheticism as she deflates Burkean tropes of sublimity as sterile to present motherhood
as a respectable stage of life (Moskal 278-79). Beth Dolan Kautz further examines how Wollstonecraft engages “picturesque travel as therapeutic” for melancholic feeling (42). By discussing the “salutary” relief of the picturesque, Wollstonecraft refutes conceits which found melancholia to be solely an “illness of male intellectuals” (36).

Other critics find interest, however, in the agency of Wollstonecraft’s imaginative language. Mary Favret observes, for instance, the constructive “power” of Wollstonecraft’s “female imagination” and defines this energy as a force that generates “discourse which reconciles heroine and philosopher, feeling and reason, writer and reader in a productive enterprise” (120, 97). Barbara Taylor contends that the source of Wollstonecraft’s “feminist imagination” is her religious perspective which was influenced significantly by Richard Price and his circle of Unitarian Dissenters. Unitarianism’s focus on moral individualism and “private reasoned judgment” formed a critical foundation for Wollstonecraft’s political creativity, remarks Taylor (Feminist Imagination, 103). Additionally, Taylor posits, Wollstonecraft considered the imagination a “sacred faculty, linking the fantasizing mind to its Maker” (21). She viewed her creative and political utterances as derivative of and substantiated by a higher force. Hence, the aesthetic language Wollstonecraft utilizes is delivered with intense conviction and resolve.

While many scholars look at the polemical and persuasive nature of Wollstonecraft’s discourse, one area that must be examined more fully is how she utilizes a specific aesthetic—the picturesque—to advance enlightening reflections on subjectivity. Nancy Armstrong articulates that the eighteenth-century novel in its multiple performances of self-discipline, self-possession, and emotionally charged reflections
literally “gave tangible form” to the concept of subjectivity and, in effect, contributed to
the growth of the modern subject (4). Novels, she contends, effectually conceive of and
promulgate the notion of an individuated self, which readers continually digest (12-14).
Starting in the eighteenth-century, texts sculpted the realm of interiority and exteriority
and established a relationship between the two by showcasing interchanges between a
narrative subject and other characters, objects, or external situations (16-17). If indeed
Armstrong’s assessment is correct, Wollstonecraft contributes to this textual creation of
interior and exterior domains, which manifest conspicuously in her picturesque
delineations. Wollstonecraft’s distinctive use of this aesthetic to foreground instructive
events on subjective improvement deserves further analysis.

Wollstonecraft treats the picturesque moment as an opportune juncture for the
edification of readers. Her aesthetic descriptions illustrate and comment on the close
correlation between exterior forces and interior development, showing how one realm
influences and often determines the state of the other. Using the picturesque, she
illuminates how exterior circumstances symbiotically relate to interior perceptions and
subjective development. To Wollstonecraft, external domains are also frequently
metonymic signifiers of internal conditions. She employs her revised mode of the
picturesque as a pedagogic tool to impress these principles upon her readership. An
analysis of Wollstonecraft’s use of picturesque tropes, how she employs the aesthetic to
concentrate on and segue into particular lessons, and how she spotlights exemplary and
non-exemplary picturesque scenarios illustrates how Wollstonecraft composes aesthetic
prose for enlightening measure.
Didactic thoughts and proclivities ground aesthetic moments in Wollstonecraft’s discourse and create a pedagogical mode of description. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines pedagogy as an “art, occupation, or practice of teaching”. It is a “system of training,” a “means of guidance,” and a “place of instruction” (*OED*). Points of such artistic tuition characterize picturesque vignettes Wollstonecraft depicts. Varying images, social situations, and geographic sites she records evoke edifying reflections and intimations. Given the popularity of the picturesque, which will be discussed in Chapter One, the aesthetic was an effective and cogent device by which to inform Wollstonecraft’s contemporary audience. As Bohls suggests, Wollstonecraft utilizes the power and pleasure of the aesthetic to challenge socio-political ideologies which marginalized human subjects based upon prejudicial notions of sex, class, and gender (167). While Bohl’s analysis is sound, I find that the primary impetus of Wollstonecraft’s aesthetic language is to instruct and improve her reader. She effectually creates enlightening units within her text, making education the primary thrust of her aesthetic discourse. Her appropriation of picturesque terminology and apposite landscape description holds instructive merit which in turn facilitates and complements the political agenda other scholars note exists in her discourse. Whatever special interests she maintains, these firstly derive from a pedagogical mode of inquiry and representation.

To understand what Wollstonecraft’s aesthetic “taste for the picturesque” encompassed, it is necessary to establish the terms, features, and cultural values associated with the picturesque. The chapter that follows will look at three major theorists of the picturesque—Reverend William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, and Richard Payne Knight—to help illuminate what this aesthetic and its attendant characteristics entailed. In
addition, discussion regarding Wollstonecraft’s response to contemporary writers of picturesque travelogues will help identify what aspects of aesthetic description she valued and what aspects she rejected. The second chapter will consider how Wollstonecraft appropriates picturesque tropes in her children’s book *Original Stories* to explicate the relationship between exteriority and interiority. Early in her career Wollstonecraft utilizes characteristically picturesque motifs to advance concepts that pertain to subjective improvement. While clearly a didactic text, *Original Stories* strategically conjoins aesthetic language to instructive moments so as to concentrate and comment on interior development. The third chapter will discuss Wollstonecraft’s picturesque descriptions in her *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Here too the aesthetic appears as paradigmatic framework in which Wollstonecraft investigates the correlation between exterior forces and interior conditions. She effectually invests the popular genre of travel writing with reflections on how external and internal circumstances mutually shape human understanding and agency, offering her readers an edifying sequence of picturesque vignettes. The aesthetic, for Wollstonecraft, holds an auspicious power that, if properly applied, can foreground educative knowledge.
CHAPTER 1
Defining Picturesque Ground

The term “picturesque” maintains a rather vague history, most likely originating from the French term “pittoresque” and Italian “pittoresco” and entering English discourse in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century. The picturesque applied to that which in nature was “suitable for pictorial representation” (Hipple 186).¹ From the mid to late eighteenth-century, the term gained common usage due largely to a rise in travel literature and domestic tourism, texts on aesthetic taste, and a boom in formal landscape gardening (Andrews 39-66).² Edmund Burke’s influential *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) certainly provided the curious traveler or painter aesthetic principles and terminology to use when visiting landscapes. However it was not until the 1790s that theorists began to consider critically the primary cause and effects associated with the term “picturesque.” Reverend William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, and Richard Payne Knight spearheaded theoretical discussion and sought to define better the corollary attributes of this aesthetic.

Gilpin opens critical inquiry on the picturesque with his 1792 *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty, On Picturesque Travel, On Sketching Landscape*. Although he had previously used the term in *Observations on the River Wye* (1782), Gilpin explicitly defines the picturesque in *Three Essays* as that “quality which makes objects particularly pleasing in painting” (Bermingham 63; Gilpin 6). He considers the aesthetic a “species” of the beautiful as defined by Burke, existing not as a distinct category but rather as “picturesque beauty” (6). The aesthetic differs, however, from the “smoothness” and “neatness” of beauty by emphasizing roughness and ruggedness, age and ruin, and an
infinite variety of textures, contrasts, lights and shades. A coarse landscape with “broken ground,” “rugged oaks,” and unkempt walkways is rather delightful, posits Gilpin (8). Give pleasure grounds “the rudeness of a road,” he claims, with wheel-track marks, “stone,” and “brushwood” (8). Private properties ought to resemble the unkempt fields and craggy trails of the open countryside according to Gilpin. The aesthetic entails that which is seemingly unaffected and unrefined.

Human expression also offers striking examples of the picturesque for Gilpin. He lauds, for example, a countenance that bears the “rough touches of age,” highlighting features like a “forehead furrowed with wrinkles,” “strongly marked” cheeks, a “shaggy beard,” and “austere brow” (10). Such attributes render a sense of “dignity,” “wisdom,” “experience,” and “energetic meaning” and effectively evoke sentimental response and imaginative reflections in an observer, claims Gilpin (10). Similarly, individuals in some state of action or strife—a laborer “agitated by passion” with “muscles swoln [sic] by strong exertion”—are attractive to Gilpin (12). He desires surface effects yet cares little whether the object of study is a “worn-out cart-horse,” “bristly boar” or a rustic peasant (14). Rather hard lines and “ruffled” textures best arouse the imagination and inquisitive tendencies in painter and traveler alike, according to Gilpin.

Gilpin guarantees, however, that intellectual gratification and recreational divertissements occur in picturesque scenarios. Nature, he writes, offers an “infinite variety” and “wonderful storehouse” of images, forms, textures, and hues which “in her simplest and purest stile, open unexhausted springs of amusement,” “rational” or otherwise (42, 44, 47). Aesthetic enjoyment derives especially from surprise—that “agreeable suspense” and “love of novelty”—associated with searching for picturesque
“Nor is there in traveling a greater pleasure, than when a scene of grandeur bursts unexpectedly upon the eye, accompanied with some accidental circumstance of the atmosphere,” writes Gilpin (44). Further aesthetic pleasure comes from the picturesque traveler’s license to sketch scenes with unconstrained composition. Gilpin proposes the artist-tourist briefly record each picturesque moment with a strong, deliberate delineation that “freely” depicts the primary features of the object of study (17). Such “free, bold touch” of the paintbrush is more pleasurable than keeping “delicate” lines and precise representations, suggests Gilpin (17). Instead, rough compositions kindle the imagination with “glowing ideas” which have an “astonishing effect on the mind,” such as improved reasoning and refined taste (57). “Nature is the archetype,” contends Gilpin, “The stronger therefore the impression, the better the [resulting] judgment” (53). From Gilpin’s perspective, picturesque moments thus act as stimuli for rational improvement and creative edification.

Where Gilpin identifies the picturesque as a “species” of beauty, Price defines a new aesthetic category for the picturesque. Writing in response to Gilpin, Price states in his 1794 Essay on the Picturesque, “There are few words whose meaning has been less accurately determined than that of the word Picturesque” (34). Price agrees that the term applies to that which is “represented with good effect in painting” yet he sees the picturesque as having an entirely “separate character” and “distinct class” from either the sublime or the beautiful (34, 39). Characteristic features include “roughness,” “sudden variation,” and “irregularity” which, according to Price, are “the most efficient causes of the picturesque” (45). Where the beautiful is smooth, “gradual,” and indicates “youth and freshness,” the picturesque is unpolished, “sudden and irregular,” and exhibits “age” and
“decay” (76-77). And while the sublime deals in “greatness,” “awe and terror,” “infinity,” and “uniformity,” the picturesque can be either small or large, is “light and playful,” finite, and lacks homogeneity (80-81). Examples Price cites are rustic hovels, cottage mills, ragged barns, Gothic ruins, and any structure or scene with a “peculiar effect of form, tint, or lights and shadow” marked by “extreme intricacy” (52). Again, surface effects are primary delights for the picturesque savant.

Yet Price attends to internal affects stimulated by the aesthetic. He explicates further the differences between the sublime, beautiful, and picturesque by expanding Burke’s thesis on the physiological reactions associated with the first two aesthetics. The sublime incites astonishment, pain, terror, and awe whereas the beautiful evokes “love and complacency” and a sense of “inward . . . melting and languor,” explains Price. The one causes the nerves to be stretched beyond their normal state; the other causes the nerves to relax below normalcy. The picturesque, however, evokes a state of “active curiosity” and “neither relaxes nor violently stretches the [nervous] fibres [sic],” states Price (86). This aesthetic rather acts as a corrective agent, stimulating the “languor of beauty” and balancing the “horror [and “astonishment’] of sublimity” (86). According to Price, the aesthetic frees the mind of both lackadaisical and oppressive influences, “loosening those iron bonds” which handicap mental faculties. Instead it gives “play” to the imagination and individual spirit and, thus, possesses the capacity to enlighten an artist or traveler who engages its power (87).

Knight then appropriates the definitions Gilpin and Price propose of the picturesque in his own quest to classify cultural taste. In honor of Price’s essay, Knight addresses his 1794 “The Landscape: A Didactic Poem” to his friend and colleague. Here
he rearticulates the values of roughness, ruggedness, and “irregular and free” variety which, he finds, “please the sense, and satisfy the mind”: “But when you traverse rough uneven ground / Consult your ease, and you will oft go round,” maintains Knight (1.40, 143, 149-50). Like Gilpin and Price, Knight identifies surprise as a key ingredient of the aesthetic experience: “The best approach to ev’ry beauteous scene, / Is where it’s least expected or foreseen” (1.178-78). Thrill of the unanticipated centers Knight’s pleasure. He further values how the aesthetic’s simplicity concentrates truth in “plain undecorated lines,” representing “nature’s genuine charms,” as opposed to the conspicuous affectation of formal landscape gardening (1.208, 251-53). Again, the unpolished and seemingly natural setting warrants praise.

Knight’s aesthetic program, however, constructs a hierarchy as he ranks aesthetic objects for the well-bred, well-informed picturesque connoisseur. A good picturesque aficionado, in his estimation, was knowledgeable of both classical painting and literature. The landscapes of Claude Lorrain, Gaspard Dughet, and Salvador Rosa and the writings of Virgil and Horace—or at least the “anglicized versions” of them—were familiar terrains to the cultivated enthusiast (Andrews 5). Knight presents the picturesque as an educated skill-set one acquires by study. Good training involves not only knowledge of the classics but also knowledge of the three compositional planes—foreground, middle-ground, and background—and an understanding of how to blend lights, shades, and textures correctly. The “rude unskilled eye,” he explains, rather chases “wild variety with zeal” and “bright tints” in “gay confusion” yet lacks the mindfulness to appreciate fully a sophisticated, aesthetic engagement (1.181-88). According to Knight, a refined palate
comes from keeping an eye for meticulous detail and patiently awaiting for aesthetic
wonder to occur:

But cautiously will taste its stores reveal;
Its greatest art is aptly to conceal;
To lead, with secret guile, the prying sight,
To where component parts may best unite,
And form one beauteous, nicely blended whole,
To charm the eye and captivate the soul. (1.191-95)

Knight maintains that once an individual learns this careful program the picturesque will
bring much pleasure and intellectual refinement. Similar to Gilpin and Price, he finds the
aesthetic leads ultimately to profound edification:

Form’d to amuse, instruct, and please the mind,
By study polish’d, and by arts refin’d;
Arts, whose benignant powers around dispense
The grace of pleasure, that’s approved by sense;
And, bending nature to their soft controul,
Expand, exalt, and purify the soul. (1.371-76)

Such elevation and knowledge can correct and nourish impoverished situations, poor
habits, and ill conceits, suggests Knight: “Study but methodizes and corrects . . . Train’d
by experience, nurtur’d by retreat, / Reason makes theory and practice meet” (1.398-401).
The picturesque signifies for Knight a person’s intellectual and spiritual pedigree. Yet to
reach this selective and moral high ground, an individual must be conversant in the terms,
patterns, and experiences of picturesque delight.
Given the cultural partialities and hierarchic language inscribed in picturesque aestheticisms, it is important to consider what socio-economic realities this trend overlooked. Ann Bermingham convincingly shows how the picturesque ignored the drastically changing economies of the English countryside which had resulted from an increasingly capitalistic society (74-75). Labor relations between many landowners and dependents degenerated, for instance, as work dynamics “shifted from a paternalistic, quasi-feudal system of reciprocal rights and duties” to wage-mediated systems “bonded only by a cash nexus” (Bermingham 74). Over-expanding enclosures, which caused a rise in parish rates, and agricultural technology altered demographics significantly and displaced many workers who depended upon common lands to harvest produce and raw materials for custom trades (Janowitz 155). Furthermore, the division of labor became “increasingly gender-specified” as many women who had previously played a vital role in the agricultural industry were replaced by new technologies which performed their jobs with marked efficiency (Janowitz 157). Many middle class women moved from being “employed as subsidiary partners” in the family farm or trade to domestic figures housed by unemployment (Taylor 4). Yet the picturesque denied acknowledging major socio-political revolutions were taking place.

The aesthetic instead concentrated its attention on attractive surface features and effects rather than the causes or social issues which made scenes particularly rustic. The picturesque perspective absorbed images, textures, and sensations, often creating a misinformed or blithe understanding of particular locales. Gilpin, for example, advises against close scrutiny and thoughtful consideration: “[T]he province of the picturesque eye is to survey nature; not to anatomize matter. It throws it’s [sic] glances around in the
broad-cast stile. . . . It examines parts, but never descends to particles” (26). Many critics find that the picturesque tended to objectify rural poverty and, as Bermingham suggests, actually “mystified” economic truths which contributed to depressed regions and dispossessed peoples (75). Picturesque tourists, as Stephen Copley notes, lived in a world of luxury and merely explored the world of others to imaginatively “construct their own symbolic geography of the country” (50). A certain detachment and disinterestedness characterized many aesthetes journeying through rustic domains.⁴

As is well-established, the picturesque enthusiast unfortunately was not necessarily required to respond to ruins or poverty with moral, ethical, or political reflection. Instead the aesthetic was “anti-georgic,” comments Malcolm Andrews, preferring the “gypsy” and “beggar” over the industrious laborer or farmer (64). As Gilpin admits in his 1786 lake tour, “In a moral view, the industrious mechanic is a more pleasing object than the loitering peasant. But in the picturesque light, it is otherwise. The arts of industry are rejected; and even idleness . . . adds dignity to a character” (Lakes, 2.43-44, qtd. in Copley 56). Expanding industry, poor workhouses, and the inequities and harsh conditions related to such commercial growth were disregarded by the picturesque eye. Price, for example, disdains signs of industry and finds structures like factories “disbeautifying” and an “ugly, unwanted intrusion into picturesque nature” (qtd in Bermingham 80). Similarly Gilpin in his 1791 Remarks on Forest Scenery and Other Woodland Views, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty rejects “matters of utility,” writing that the picturesque “has nothing to do with the affairs of the plough, and the spade; but merely examines the face of nature as a beautiful object” (Remarks, 298, qtd. in Copley 49). Such objectification continues in his Three Essays wherein Gilpin admits,
“We contemplate neither exactness of form; nor expression, any farther then it is shewn in action; we merely consider general shapes, dresses, groups, and occupations” (44-45).

As aforementioned, it does not matter what the object of study is as long it has—in Gilpin’s words—“use as a picturesque object” (45, emphasis added). Yet this limited approach calls into question the moral and intellectual authority of this aesthetic practice. If the picturesque tourist ignores “exactness” for “general shapes” and only values aesthetic “use,” s/he is not required to be socially cognizant of his/her subject matter. This shortsighted perspective belies the notion that picturesque standards purify the soul and enlighten the mind.⁵

Despite political negligence and patrician ideologies promulgated by certain aesthetes, socially conscientious writers were not necessarily deterred from applying picturesque tropes in their literature. In fact some incorporate the aesthetic so as to subvert and deflate marginalizing aestheticism.⁶ Martin Price points out that Jane Austen undermines aesthetic subjugations in her 1814 Mansfield Park (267). Henry Crawford, for example, represents the picturesque connoisseur, yet his gestures at high cultivation are swiftly undercut as his dissolute and manipulative character is revealed (267). Austen likewise satirizes elite aestheticism like Knight’s in Northanger Abbey, as Price and Bermingham have shown (Price, 266; Bermingham, 83-84). Although published in 1817, Northanger Abbey was drafted in 1798 and 1799, making Austen’s aesthetic appropriation current to theoretical discussions in the late eighteenth-century. Her signature irony appears in the oft-referenced scene where Henry Tilney teaches Catherine Morland to identify the picturesque:
He talked of fore-grounds, distances, and second distance—side-screen and perspectives—lights and shades;—and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar, that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath, as unworthy to make part of the landscape.

(107)

Here Austen intimates that shallow perspectives have falsified social distinctions and inaccurately become signifiers of education and cultural sophistication.

Other re-appropriations of the picturesque can be found in Joanna Baillie’s *Poems; Wherein it is Attempted to Describe Certain Views of Nature and of Rustic Manners* (1790), Charlotte Smith’s *The Emigrants* (1793), and Mary Robinson’s *Lyrical Tales* (1800). These works incorporate characteristically rustic figures and migrant persons, yet those characters are given a place, identity, subjectivity, and in some cases a chance to articulate socio-political grievances and tragedies that brought about their plight and destitution. Social realism comes to the fore as writers re-work and revise the picturesque aesthetic. Baillie, for example, in her poem “A Winter Day” depicts the humble situation of a peasant family yet highlights the material reality of their domestic abode and the physical activity of their daily labor. In her picturesque descriptions, she underlines human compassion, charity, and warmth and rather values the virtue of human industry. In *The Emigrants*, Smith similarly shifts the picturesque frame and levels social privileges by underscoring parallel desires and experiences shared between the contemplative narrator, the dispossessed French clergy, a rustic peasant, and a solitary shepherd. Smith suggests that all humanity is desirous of home or political asylum, freedom, and rest regardless of title, distinction, or cultural heritage. In “All Alone,”
Robinson too relays an intimate exchange between a traveler and destitute child to reveal the physical plight and emotional sorrow the latter experiences. Likewise in Robinson’s “The Alien Boy,” the conventionally picturesque site of a “solitary hut / Built on a jutting crag” is invested with the tragic history of a courageous father lost to a stormy sea, an event the “lone exile” Henry witnessed as a young child (lines 2-3, 133). The poem renders an explanation for Henry’s depressed agency and chosen solitude. These human tales incorporate picturesque tropes yet acknowledge therein the physical and psychological state of individual lives. Such approaches in effect reject the exercise of detached observation and social objectification as illustrated by aesthetes like Gilpin, Price, or Knight.

Certainly Wollstonecraft was familiar with picturesque theory and practice, as evident in her commentary on travel literature in the *Analytical Review*. Her remarks on Gilpin reveal, for example, that she found a strong link between aesthetic moments and intellectual and moral improvement. Reviewing four texts by Gilpin from 1789 to 1792, Wollstonecraft surprisingly praises this “ingenuous author” who represents picturesque principles with critical focus, taste, and personal feeling. To Wollstonecraft, Gilpin refreshingly counters those who “rambl[e] with an unfixed eye through a variety of desultory matter and detached observation” (7.161). She rather values his writing because it illustrates to her connected ideas that bear descriptive immediacy and vividly manifest the interiority of the author despite whatever negligible habits Gilpin may have propagated. “[H]e looked at nature with his own eyes,” remarks Wollstonecraft, as opposed to what she terms in another review “itinerants, who travel strait forward merely to name the objects as they occur, and select pretty landscapes” (7.197, 432). Gilpin also
includes drawings with his observations which, Wollstonecraft contends, “fix the attention, and rouse the imagination” enabling readers to “enter into [Gilpin’s] feelings” about given scenes (7.162). She credits a writer’s capacity to manifest interior “feeling” and stimulate the audience’s “imagination” by way of a decided line of inquiry.

Wollstonecraft recognizes, however, that the picturesque is connected to shallow purposes and effusive sentiments that, perniciously, can cause unthinking habits and behaviors. The strange paradox of this aesthetic is how at times it contributes to emotional excess and social disregard; yet on other occasions it sparks keen analysis of social paradigms and stabilizes ecstatic proclivities. J. Hassell’s 1790 Tour of the Isle of Wight demonstrates the former as, Wollstonecraft notes, his “search of picturesque beauties” results in nothing more than “affected phrase,” “a continual display of extatic feelings [sic],” and a “redundancy of adjectives” (7.279). Hassel writes “in an artificial style, calculated to pamper the imagination and leave the understanding to starve,” contends Wollstonecraft (7.279). She rather finds that balanced feeling and rational thought are necessary components when engaging aesthetic scenarios. Picturesque situations can ground perspectives if one approaches the aesthetic moment thoughtfully. In a respectful review of Francis Garden’s continental travelogue, she writes “this worthy nobleman saw every thing in the most favourable [sic] light; yet with the clear eye of common sense” (7.420). Garden’s natural “sentiments and observations . . . seem to flow from a well regulated mind,” states Wollstonecraft (7.420).° She thus values cultivated taste matched by sober reflection when dealing with aesthetic sites and corresponding delineations.
Indeed the picturesque represents an ambiguous and, at times, problematic domain in late eighteenth-century literature. While major theorists agreed on general aesthetic traits, the picturesque frame was elastic and often delved into contentious subjects beyond the realm of aesthetic taste. One interesting note Hipple offers is that Johnson’s *Dictionary*, even by its 1785 sixth edition, only used the term “picturesque” to define other words while it itself was not granted a separate entry (185, 354). The term’s denotation and connotation thus lived in a land of indeterminacy. While the term “picturesque” generally meant “appropriate for painting,” its application bore varying inferences and associations as it and its tropes appeared in multiple genres like poetry, plays, novels, treatises, and literature reviews. Interestingly enough, in her 1792 review of Gilpin’s *Three Essays* Wollstonecraft remarks that “it seemed incumbent on [Gilpin] to tell us the precise signification which he gave to a word often used in a vague sense” (7.455). She applauds his decision to “attain a clear idea of the meaning which he himself has affixed to the appropriated terms” (7.455). What is interesting about these comments is Wollstonecraft’s recognition that Gilpin “gave” the term a “precise signification” and “affixed” his own “meaning” to “appropriated terms.” If a word possesses a “vague sense,” it can be inscribed easily with selective meaning, foregrounding some ideas and not others, and be presented strategically with a particular definition attached to it. In other words, within the linguistic ambiguity of this aesthetic, within its unsettled space of indeterminate meanings, stood the opportunity for a writer to appropriate, re-configure, and employ some aspects of the term “picturesque” according to his/her own rhetorical agenda. As Godwin informs us, Wollstonecraft “had a taste for the picturesque.” So the question remains: What features of the aesthetic did she prefer? What specifically did
Wollstonecraft have a “taste” for? Moreover, how did this socially conscientious writer engage an aesthetic that, in some cases, was associated with rather negligible, decadent practices?

John Ruskin would remark in 1856 that there are two kinds of picturesque: the nobler picturesque and the surface picturesque (Price 264-65; Brennan 36). The nobler picturesque acknowledges the “inner character of the object” of study with “tender sympathy.” The surface picturesque, as its name suggests, delights in purely exterior forms and textures “without any comprehension of the pathos of character hidden beneath” (Modern Painters IV, Part V, Ch 1, para 9). The painter of the former “has communion of heart with his subject [matter],” whereas a painter of the latter is “heartless” and “only casts his eyes upon [content] feelinglessly [sic]” and “seems to go forth into the world in a temper as merciless as its rocks” (MP IV, Part V, Ch 1, para 12). Clearly, for Ruskin, the traveler who delights in the surface picturesque lacks a depth of character and is driven by a vain impulse indicative of impoverished intellect and derelict feelings. He distinguishes between the thoughtful and thoughtless aesthete, praising the individual who studies subject matter with his/her heart and mind mutually invested as opposed to exercising a mindless, apathetic perspective.

This distinction between feeling and unfeeling is what sets apart Wollstonecraft’s version of this aesthetic. She embraces picturesque tropes as a viable means toward critical reflection and as a way to display subjectivity and balanced feeling. Yet she is also well aware that the aesthetic brings with it a chance for cultural slippage into mindless engagement. “The poet will ever be enamoured [sic] of nature, and mark her enchanting variety as he ‘muses along’; but the world is filled with people who feel by
rule, and only see what others have seen,” she writes in the *Analytical* (7.303). Her own appropriation of the picturesque thus urgently presents an improved aesthetic that aims to cultivate in her readership sensible yet feeling cognition.
CHAPTER 2
Calculated Improvement by Picturesque Design in *Original Stories*

The way to render instruction most useful cannot always be adopted; knowledge should be gradually imparted, and flow more from example than teaching: example directly addresses the senses, the first inlets to the heart . . . . (WMW, 4.359)

From the preface to her children’s book, *Original Stories*, it is clear that Wollstonecraft considers empiricism an effective, pedagogical theory. Instruction, for her, should guide by “example” that strikes the “senses” to make impressions which improve pupils’ understanding. Wollstonecraft advocates an experiential model of education, one that directly engages feeling and thought yet has relevance to larger contexts, as opposed to teaching content that lacks real-world application. Certainly her work’s full title, *Original Stories from Real Life: With Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness*, expresses Wollstonecraft’s didactic aim to use realistic, exterior paradigms strategically to discuss the topic of interior development. *Original Stories* purposefully interacts with individual readers, both adults and children, at the level of subjectivity. Kelly suggests that when Wollstonecraft addresses the “heart” by instructive “example” in the “Preface,” she addresses the “emotional, sympathetic, imaginative, subjective [and “moral”] self” of her reader (61). Anne Chandler adds that the object lessons of *Original Stories* are interested in artistically showcasing the “underpinnings of sensibility” via “models of being and knowing, models of consciousness” (327). Wollstonecraft’s pedagogical “conversation”
deliberately moves inward to explore how external environments and sensate experiences condition interior attributes.

One curious feature that facilitates these instructive “stories” is Wollstonecraft’s pedagogical use of the picturesque. She appropriates aesthetic tropes to foreground and comment on subjective improvement. Examining her use of motifs like variety and irregularity, rural simplicity and tranquility, and roughness, ruggedness, and ruins will illustrate how Wollstonecraft enacts an aesthetic pedagogy to guide her readers by salient “example” towards personal edification. Part of this process also manifests lessons that utilize a picturesque frame or loco-descriptive movement to concentrate effectively on substantial moments of interior revelation. In effect, Wollstonecraft seeks to secure a foundation for the moral improvement of her readers by way of such textual, aesthetic maneuvers.

Published anonymously in 1788 with a second edition bearing Wollstonecraft’s name and plates by William Blake in 1791, Original Stories appeared during a time when children’s literature was quite a profitable market for men and women writers alike. Given the rise of literacy rates across the century coupled with the burgeoning middle class, many parents were “anxious to provide their offspring with a modern education and competitive literary skills” (Richardson Literature, 109). While John Newberry is credited with starting the children’s book industry with his 1744 A Little Pretty Pocket-Book, it was the late 1770s, 80s, and 90s that witnessed a boom in children’s publications (Richardson 109). Locke’s An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689) and Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693) greatly influenced pedagogical texts with his notion the mind is “white Paper” “imprinted” by ideas which form a person’s
character and understanding (Richardson 128). Children’s literature thus sought to monitor what impressions youth received at an early age and, like Locke, stressed rational development in effort to quell the passions and cultivate virtue (Franklin 33). The child, in effect, became re-conceptualized “as a kind of text” on which character and virtue could be printed (Richardson 128). Jean-Jacques Rousseau also impacted pedagogical theory with his 1762 *Emile* which promoted, in part, learning by physical experience as opposed to by dry, formal tutorials. Inclusion of object lessons whereby characters improve via hands-on learning began to appear in children’s books, seen notably in works by Thomas Day, David Williams, John Aikin, Wollstonecraft, and Richard and Maria Edgeworth (Richardson *Cambridge*, 29).

Children’s literature ranged in ideological perspectives, however, from the more conservative stances of Hannah More and Sarah Trimmer to the moderately liberal position of the Edgeworths and Anna Laetitia Barbauld to the radical views of William Godwin (Richardson *Literature*, 111). Since child development was a central issue, author-educators began to disseminate age-specific literature, such as the Edgeworths’ *Early Lessons* (1801) which includes characters of different ages so that young readers can identity with and learn from his/her own fictive cohort (Richardson 130). Late century publications often were organized by age group and contained “carefully screened” content and a “schematic tailoring of vocabulary, style, and narrative structure” in effort to discipline and control the impressions of youthful minds (Richardson 131). These “educational technologies” targeted an audience of children, parents, and teachers and occur in “well-illustrated” poetry books, animal stories, primers and textbooks, hymnbooks, and—for the budding female reader—conduct books (Richardson 128;
Thematic content in children’s texts ranged from lessons on reading, textualizing the self by writing, and understanding the self as legible to others and to God (Richardson 133). Subject areas also include more “progressive” issues such as the treatment of animals, anti-slavery, charity, appreciating laborers, and the merits of “Sunday School” (Richardson 127). Wollstonecraft’s own “calculated” aim in Original Stories to “Regulate the Affectionate and Form the Mind” with “real life” stories thus fittingly met conventional standards with its own series of object lessons, age-specific characters, and reflections on reading, writing, and monitoring the self.

The champion of Wollstonecraft’s didactic mission is Mrs. Mason, the surrogate mother, “woman of tenderness and discernment,” and “near relation” placed in charge of two girls—Caroline and Mary—ages twelve and fourteen (4.361). Born into a wealthy family yet raised from infancy by “servants, or people equally ignorant,” Caroline and Mary have acquired a host of bad habits (4.361). From trampling insects to ridiculing others, from vanity to negligence and overindulgent behavior, the two are in need of much correction. Mrs. Mason, likely named after an assistant at Wollstonecraft’s Newington Green school, reforms these unruly girls by inculcating an appreciation for the natural world and domestic, quotidian life (CLMW, 56). She employs anecdotal stories of exemplary and non-exemplary characters, uses symbols, analogies, and history, is quick to discipline and/or shame, and readily applies hands-on education to stimulate the girls’ cognition and memory. Mason’s lessons include conversations on animal cruelty, social injustice, broken families, and human degeneration, and she underscores models of charity and critical reflection while also highlighting examples of reprehensible behavior. Given that Wollstonecraft recently had left an unpleasant post as
governess at the Kingsborough estate in Ireland, a position she held from 1786 to 1787, the educational wrongs propagated by indulgent and spurious aristocracy were indeed on her mind when writing *Original Stories* (Todd 87-88, 125-26). Parental negligence has created a “[c]ruel necessity” for others to reform children, “teaching virtue, [to] explain the nature of vice,” states Wollstonecraft in her “Preface” (4.359). As Janet Todd suggests, Mrs. Mason is Wollstonecraft’s “governess fantasy, in which children are rescued from sophisticated aristocrats by a discerning surrogate” (126).

To understand Mason’s “rescue” mission, it is first useful to consider the phenomenological basis grounding her conception of the natural world and humanity, two topics which play into Wollstonecraft’s picturesque aesthetic. Mason articulates a belief that nature is an exemplar of God’s wisdom and exists as a paradigm that mankind may study for improvement. “To attain any thing great, a model must be held up to exercise our understanding, and engage our affections,” she posits (4.423). That “model” exists everywhere in the natural world. From the macro to micro-level, from grand forms to lowly creatures, all existence demonstrates the “perfection,” “Goodness,” and omnipresence of a “Supreme Being,” contends Mason (4.423). Further, mankind was formed to desire divine wisdom and to grow accordingly: “The human soul is so framed, that goodness and truth must fill it with ineffable pleasure and the nearer it approaches to perfection, the more earnestly will it pursue those virtues” (4.423). Yet subjective improvement is not a free endowment innately bestowed to humanity; individuals must pursue divine “perfection” actively: “[F]or wisdom consists in *searching* Him out and *endeavoring* to copy his attributes,” claims Mason (4.423, emphasis added). Leading her two charges through various experiences, Mason illustrates how to “search”
God’s creation and “endeavor” towards said refinement. Picturesque contexts and terminology then become the method she applies for illuminating how human subjectivity exchanges and develops by way of exterior discoveries.

Wollstonecraft uses the trope of variety in *Original Stories* to explicate the corresponding relationship between the external world and internal developments. Near the beginning of the book, for example, Mason explains to Caroline and Mary how her tulip and rose garden activates and contributes to the growth of her understanding. The garden exhibits a “charm of variety” by way of diverse colors and assorted arrangements. Walking along these variegated paths “enables me to vary my daily prospect,” posits Mason (4.390). The environment stimulates her mind and day-to-day reflections, sharpening her acumen, which helps Mason to understand how exterior aesthetics affect human perception. This garden-bred “variety” represents a kind of aesthetic beauty that has interior substance, complexity, and durability. It counters mere “bodily beauty” which is all-surface and only “please[s] the eye for a moment,” suggests Mason (4.390). Like Gilpin or Price, she contends that “uniformity soon tires . . . the active mind” which rather desires intrigue that maintains appeal, profound significance, and use for intellectual activity or other productive measure (4.390). While surfaces that issue “regularity and colour [sic]” may first attract attention, those allures are temporal and eventually become all too familiar and insipid, asserts Mason (4.390). For her, the more heterogeneous and delightfully unpredictable a setting, the more that critical analysis and reflection are likely to occur.

This multifarious landscape prompts Mason to read her environment actively, ruminate upon her subjective response, and distill meaning from the complex, sensate
experience. Also significant is the fact that she chooses to interact and respond to her environment, a setting she herself created. Mason’s example indicates that a person can elect to think about a given milieu and, if s/he has the resources and political freedom, that individual can cultivate surrounding associations to better his/her development. Diversifying her thoughts by way of varied subject matter, Mason pleasantly exercises critical reflection, an activity she illustrates for Caroline, Mary, and the reader.

Mason’s decision to cogitate upon external circumstances generates another lesson on interiority: it signifies how subjective qualities are exhibited outwardly. This variegated garden elicits a response from Mason, revealing particular tastes, perceptions, and knowledge she holds. Wollstonecraft indicates that while exterior conditions may shape a person’s interior development, that individual’s very reaction to an atmosphere broadcasts a degree of his/her subjectivity to others. In other words, Wollstonecraft shows how human behaviors that proceed from physical experience with the world at large are reflexive in nature and manifest parts of an individual’s interior being, be that his/her cognitive understanding, tastes and partialities, or other needs and personal struggles. For Wollstonecraft, the exterior world and an individual’s interiority represent two domains that transmit impressions upon each other. External factors can weigh upon a person’s development, yet the resulting utterance or action of that person also delivers a signifier to the outside world, publicly symbolizing some portion of his/her private being.

Mason indeed highlights the variegated garden to emphasize the point that collective, interior parts contribute to the projected impression and surface appearance of a subject. She further uses the garden as a metaphor to teach Caroline and Mary what
authentic beauty entails (4.390). The true “soul of beauty . . . consists in the body gracefully exhibiting the emotions and variations of the informing mind,” states Mason (4.390). Honesty, prudence, and considerate thought are for her traits that shine through as exterior refinement. “If truth, humanity and knowledge inhabit the breast,” Mason explains, “the eye will beam with a mild lustre [sic], modesty will suffuse the cheeks, and smiles of innocent joy play over all the features” (390). This transmission of interior properties, what Mason terms “hidden springs” and “internal goodness,” physically bestows signs of warmth, virtue, and wisdom to a person’s exteriority. Superficial décor and “finery” or “gaudy dazzling appearances,” Mason claims, merely signify vain purpose like a house designed with an exquisite facade that inside contains “dark and inconvenient” rooms (4.390). Inner parts thus require critical attention and careful cultivation. As Mason informs Caroline, “You are certainly handsome . . . [and] have good features; but you must improve your mind to give them a pleasing expression” (4.390). Displaying Wollstonecraft’s signature blend of gendered aesthetics, Mason continues to explicate the various elements that comprise true beauty: “[T]he discriminating judgment of a person of sense requires, besides color, order, proportion, grace, and usefulness, to render the idea of beauty complete” (4.390-91). Incorporating the terms “judgment,” “sense,” “proportion,” “grace,” and “beauty” in the same sentence certainly prefaces Wollstonecraft’s deflation of Burkean aesthetics. Wollstonecraft conjoins standard masculine terms (“judgment” and “sense”) with feminine terms (“grace” and “beauty”) to undercut contemporary gendered denominations. She rather emphasizes specific faculties and attributes as human characteristics regardless of an individual’s sex or gender. Here Mason suggests a mode of beauty that is a composite
aesthetic which operates and refines by way of multiple or varied constituent elements. Interior-exterior exchange occurs, Mason notes, as the “discriminating judgment” and “sense” determine the outer features of “color, order, proportion, grace, and usefulness.” Using a picturesque garden, Wollstonecraft underscores how interiority and exteriority play against and earnestly shape one another.

It could be said that for Wollstonecraft physiological features are a metonym for a person’s intellect and subjective being. Certainly such notions were common to her time, particularly when one considers the burgeoning, medical fascinations that linked physiology to intellectual capacity and character. This interest in the relation between physicality and inner faculty is exemplified by Mason’s account of Mrs. Trueman, whose “skin and complexion” are said to derive “clearness” from her inner “temperance” (4.391). Trueman’s very name clearly epitomizes her as a credible individual; however, the language Mason employs to characterize this gentlewoman reveals additional evidence of Wollstonecraft’s aesthetic pedagogy. For instance, Mason notes that Trueman’s “features . . . are not regular,” her voice improves “every person of taste . . . [by] modulated sounds,” her manners render “simple elegance,” her “understanding” and “heart” are “happily blended in her countenance,” and people “see her varied excellencies, again and again, with increasing pleasure” (4.391). Mason effectively ties in key picturesque standards with this portrayal: irregularity, variety, simplicity, blending, and curious delight and taste. Further the Trueman residence is conventionally picturesque: a small house nestled in the branches of woodbine and jessamine with an adjacent, modest garden (4.385). Trueman’s rural simplicity, unadorned dress, and unaffected behavior are a refreshing rarity, according to Mason. She represents a noble
contrast to the likes of the “pert” Lady Sly, whose decadent lifestyle, sprawling “pleasure-grounds,” and “summer houses and temples” are blatant signs of vanity (4.385). Recall Knight’s later statement that the picturesque demonstrates truth in “plain undecorated lines” and renders “genuine charms” without affectation (Bk.I 208, 251-53). Wollstonecraft’s picturesque depiction of Trueman incorporates these very attributes to emphasize the merit of modest or unpretentious interests. Trueman maintains a better quality of life and mind than Sly, which enables her to extend domestic care to her family and local acquaintances, insists Mason. Applying picturesque terminology in this characterization, Mason foregrounds interior characteristics which render Trueman’s lifestyle virtuous and satisfying.

Yet Wollstonecraft also recasts picturesque tropes to educate readers on harsh realities, such as social and psychological conditions which shape coarser features of the solitary rustic. Early in Original Stories as she relates the tale of Crazy Robin, Mason inverts the charm of a rough, rugged site to reveal, instead, the violence linked to Robin’s destitution and psychological degeneration. Caroline and Mary learn a striking lesson about the ills of poverty and the power structures that engender penury. Wollstonecraft initially characterizes Robin’s late abode—a cave along a mountain crag—as picturesque ground to undercut the seeming tranquility of this site. Covered in “ivy” and surrounded by “stumps of trees,” this cave sits along the “broken side” of a shadowy summit where a stream pleasantly splashes “down the declivity” against “huge stones” and flows “lost in a neighbouring wood [sic]” (4.374). However, this serene location quickly gains an unfavorable association as Mason tells Robin’s tragic history and effectually invests this picturesque moment with new meaning. While Robin once “comfortably” shared a farm
with his wife and children, particular events reduced him to a “deplorable state,” forcing him to wander aimlessly the land with his cur dog (374). The “accumulated weight” of Robin’s “misfortune” starts with a large rent due to a heartless landlord who had newly inherited the property (4.374-75). Death and disease are also precipitate forces in Robin’s life. Not only do his children die in infancy from poor conditions, but also his spouse and other children contract and spread illness to die young. Robin’s two remaining children—Jacky and Nancy—are forced to beg; yet “dirt soon robbed their cheeks of . . . roses” and they too die (4.374).

Clearly the picturesque site, the alleged place of delight and amusement, takes an unpleasant yet realistic turn. The hard lines, palpable exhaustion, and “agitated” passion Gilpin favors are, in Wollstonecraft’s hands, far from buoyant and cheerful (Gilpin 12). While Wollstonecraft might agree that roughness and irregularity efficiently strike the observer—as Gilpin, Price, and Knight all contend—Mason’s portrayal of Robin refutes ideology which finds such traits always “light and playful” and “agreeable amusement” (Price 81; Gilpin 47). Where Caroline and Mary had previously “bounded” across the scene in mirth, Robin’s harsh experience bears an unkind social and psychological realism that stops them in their tracks. Socio-political grievances convert this picturesque site into a sad, dis-easing memorial. Mason admits that although Robin was once “industrious” and clear-minded, he became “unsettled,” “often frantic,” and “melancholy” (4.374-76). Such details undercut theorists who find depressed human industry a favorable sight. Robin’s indigence and bewildered state—naming his dog after his deceased children for example—and his unfortunate end were anything but pleasant sights. His interpolated history markedly shifts Caroline and Mary’s once blithe
perspective and switches their perception so that they now look upon penury with
sobering compassion.

Robin’s story holds currency too among contemporary readers given the mass
displacement of workers and common-land farmers which resulted from an extensive
degree of land enclosures in the late eighteenth century. His story moves beyond the
realm of fiction to interject the kind of bleak reality and disfranchisement many people
experienced during Wollstonecraft’s time. Wollstonecraft effectively contracts her textual
scope and thrusts upon her reader “real life” circumstances relative to the homeland.
Inverting the conventional paradigm of rusticity and ruggedness, Wollstonecraft
accentuates how socio-political conditions foment details like roughness and ruggedness.
Underscoring Mason’s maternal presence and provisional care for the girls,
Wollstonecraft advocates further acute sensitivity to and cognizance of severe pressures
extant in humanity. Mason creates an open dialogue with Robin, speaking directly to him
during his most desolate state. She intimately knows his history, acknowledges his plight
and degeneration, and attempts to assuage his unsettled state of existence. Wollstonecraft
guides her readership in a close reading and reflection on how social injustices produce
dismal physical and psychological consequences. Exterior features thus gain sharp
immediacy and significance in this re-presentation of the rugged migrant.

This uncanny turn from aesthetic pleasantry to uneasiness also occurs when
Mason and the girls visit a ruined mansion, another paradigmatic motif of the
picturesque. Only here the ruin and its grounds are not a delightful travel spot. Although
typical aesthetic features like overgrown ivy and moldering walls are present, the
mansion connotes the sense of death and decay, provoking the girls’ repugnance rather
than their sudden surprise or lively curiosity. On the house’s front, for instance, they see a sculptural relief of “maimed lions,” “vultures,” and wingless “eagles” peeking from underneath dense ivy which “almost concealed” the estate’s “noble arch,” clearly rendering notions of demise (4.402). Growing pestilence such as “moss,” “funguses,” and the “slime”-covered water basin, which is home to “toads and adders,” further indicates a state of disintegration (4.402). The long grass and fallen leaves, which “choke up the way,” create a “pathless” yard already peppered with “broken pedestals” and “crushed” ornaments (4.402-03). Even the air is “thick,” “stagnated,” and “noxious,” increasing the general “gloom” of the evening atmosphere (4.403). Where in Crazy Robin’s story the picturesque encompasses the history of social injustice, here picturesque features stand as the result of negligence and procrastination. Wollstonecraft uses the aesthetic as a supple device not only to teach goodness and charity, as in the case of Mrs. Trueman, but also as a means of instilling social conscientiousness and a desire for reform.

Appropriating the image of the ruin, Wollstonecraft emphasizes how pernicious consequences can result from idle habits and thoughtlessness, particularly as connected to affluence and privilege. In this scenario, as at Robin’s cave, the girls and the reader are asked to look beyond surface details and consider precisely what historical factors cause certain effects. Mason first exposes Caroline and Mary to this putrid scene to elicit their repulsion, which she then transfers to a discussion of the baneful lifestyle of the fittingly named proprietor, Charles Townley. Although he had “uncommon abilities, and strong feelings” as a boy, Mason explains that Townley never developed his mind because he habitually put off his duties and forgot his obligations to others (4.403). As a nouveau riche, he spent beyond his means “childishly” to decorate his estate “with taste,”
neglecting the fiscal support he promised to a friend (4.404). After this close acquaintance died in debtor’s prison, melancholy and regret soon overcame Townley; yet he selfishly mourned the fact that his friend “died thinking [he was] the most ungrateful wretch” (4.404-405). Townley’s reparation—caring for Fanny, the daughter of his late friend—was also based in vain conceit and came too late as Fanny had gone mad as a result of an abusive marriage. Yoked by association to this “poor lunatic,” this poor melancholic then “every day contemplated the saddest of all sights—the wreck of a human understanding,” explains Mason (4.406). Yet the irony is that the ultimate “wreck” is Townley’s own understanding as symbolized by the remains of his home. Given his melancholia, the estate and its grounds moved increasingly toward ruin and decay which perpetuates after each tenant dies. The deteriorating mansion now stands before Caroline, Mary, and Mason as a foul reminder of neglectful behavior.

Wollstonecraft appropriates the picturesque ruin as a metaphor to teach the virtue of social cognizance and personal accountability. Kelly convincingly shows that for professional middle-class intellectuals like Wollstonecraft, “self-construction” is yet another “version of the investment economy: the moral and intellectual self is life-capital, to be conserved against moral or intellectual extravagance” (62-63). Negligent luxury and reckless behavior ultimately impair and devastate the chance for subjective improvement. Townley undervalued both his self and others by way of his expenditures and decadent lifestyle and, in result, vanity handicapped his agency, leaving his estate, name, and person in spoils. Wollstonecraft urges her readership to choose carefully their habits and tastes with an eye towards consequence.
Wollstonecraft also uses the aesthetic as a framing device to center the reader’s attention on interiority. The story of the Welsh harpist, for example, demonstrates a picturesque frame-within-a-frame. In terms of plot, the tale begins and ends with a rustic picture of harvest time celebration, first introducing the “face of festivity” and closing with an image of “honest heart-felt mirth” (4.416, 420). Between these two moments, however, Mason relays an intimate tale of the initial exchange she had with the Welshman, who had disclosed to her the hardships that he endured. Wollstonecraft approaches and exits this story in loco-descriptive fashion which, although somewhat brief, contributes to the sense of inward progression which leads towards subjective revelation. Shifting from the macro to micro-level, Wollstonecraft pithily notes the “new scene,” “fine weather” and “ripe corn” at the opening and focuses instead on the human factor: the laborers, young and old “gleaners,” Honest Jack and his family, and the dancing “lads and lasses” (4.416). Mention of the “old Welsh harper” and Mason’s fondness for his music personalize the scene which segues into a rather picturesque synopsis of her first encounter with this musician. Interestingly enough, Mason’s personal account also opens with aesthetic tropes—a journey through Wales, an accidental visit to “old castle” ruins, and the harmonious sounds of music—and ends at this man’s rugged abode: “a little hut, rudely built” against “walls of an old tower” with “thatch,” “stones,” “mud,” and “clay” (4.416, 419).

In this scene, however, Wollstonecraft presents Mason quite differently from the standard tourist. Mason recalls in sharp detail the “extreme poverty” of the Welsh harpist and his family: a “few loose sticks” for kindling, dim lighting, a “hole” for the chimney, and a room partitioned by “twigs and dried leaves” (4.419). Further deviation from
aesthetic convention occurs when Mason notes: “[The harpist’s] appearance had roused my compassion as well as my curiosity” (4.419 emphasis added). This statement is significant in that Wollstonecraft places human “compassion” before “curiosity” or any other aesthetic byproduct the scene could engender. As in Robin’s tale, the socio-economic background of the rustic figures is made known from direct conversation with the rugged peasant. The story told is about yet another “tyrant,” a justice of the peace who harshly taxed farmers and incarcerated peasants who hunted on his land, injustices which place the Welshman in great “distress” (4.419). The added irony though is that the old castle actually belongs to the harpist by ancestry, which strikingly reverses the notion of a hermit/beggar migrating to a deserted ruin. Mason rather candidly faces history and ruin as personalized:

I thought too of the changes in life which an age had produced. The descendant of those who [had] made the hall ring with social mirth now mourned in its ruins, and hung his harp on the mouldering [sic] battlements. Such is the fate of buildings and of families! (4.420)

One must wonder whether Wollstonecraft slightly laments her own family’s squandered inheritance given her father’s shoddy investments and belligerent lifestyle. Here the picturesque moment accompanied by the harpist’s “dismal . . . Welsh ditties” presents another concise lesson on economic disparity and misfortune (4.420). By framing the narrative within picturesque depictions, Wollstonecraft zeros in on the subjective results of poverty. Yet, in closing the scene, she also emphasizes the bright consequence of sympathy and charity, which Mason extends to the Welsh family. Reciprocating his
“unbounded” gratitude, the harpist “enliven[s]” the community each year with his music, and the chapter fittingly closes with “joyous” dancing (4.420).

Following the harvest-festival, Wollstonecraft showcases interiority when Mason delivers an intimate confession incited by a picturesque moment of repose. Stepping away from the festivities, Mason and the girls join the harpist underneath a “large elm” to listen to his “most plaintive Welsh tunes” (4.422). Wollstonecraft describes the scene as follows:

The softened landscape inspired tranquility [sic], while the strains of rustic melody gave a pleasing melancholy to the whole, and made the tear start. . . . The pleasure the sight of harmless mirth gave rise to in Mrs. Mason’s bosom roused every tender feeling, and set in motion her spirits. She laughed with the poor [whom] she had made happy, and wept when she recollected her sorrows . . . (4.422)

The emotional tug of “pleasing melancholy” and “harmless mirth” and the paradoxical “laughing” and “weeping” in the same sentence localize concentration on Mason’s subjective revelation. ¹ Mason “displays plentitude of self” during this confession scene, comments Kelly (64). Like all her acquaintances, Mason admits that she too has known “griefs [sic],” “misfortunes,” severed “attachments” and “death of friends” (4.422). She too has lived with impenetrable depression which “neither the beams of prosperity, nor even those of benevolence, can dissipate” (4.422). Disclosing later that she lost both husband and child one harsh winter, Mason asserts: “I am not enveloped in a thick fog” (4.422). Instead, she holds a disinterested perspective which maintains her emotional stability and clarity of thought. By analogy to the surrounding landscape, Mason
acknowledges: “My state of mind rather resembles the scene before you, it is quiet” (4.422). Wollstonecraft had expressed much the same to her publisher Joseph Johnson shortly after her return from Ireland:

I have, literally speaking, enjoyed solitude. . . . I therefore wandered alone, by the side of the Thames, and in the neighbouring beautiful fields and pleasure grounds: the prospects were of such a placid kind, I caught tranquility while I surveyed them—my mind was still, though active. 

(CLMW, 133)

Similarly Mason claims: “I am weaned from the world, but not disgusted” (4.422). While past grievances and social misfortunes are a part of her experience, Mason’s vested interests stand apart from internal and external pressures that might bring negative repercussions. Critical objectivity—being “weaned from the world”—is what conditions, steadies, and congeals Mason’s fortitude. Moreover this disinterested state retains her sense of hope: “[F]or I can [still] do good, and in futurity a sun will rise to chear [sic] my heart” (4.422).

In addition to her disinterested perspective, Mason explains that certain internal and external conditions nevertheless do have weight and enable self-assurance and agency. She identifies interior and exterior attributes that have been beneficial to her well-being. “The festivity within, and the placidity without, led my thoughts naturally to the source from whence my comfort springs—to the Great Bestower [sic] of every blessing,” explains Mason (4.422). An internal charge, “the festivity within” Mason—be that her intellect, emotion, or both—combined with a tranquil environment, “the placidity
without,” to create a power that allowed her to see the “source” grounding her “comfort,” poise, and certitude.

What is intriguing about Mason’s comment on this “festivity within . . . placidity without” is the phrase’s proximity to the picturesque aesthetic. Consider Price’s theory that the picturesque balances the highly charged and the incredibly relaxed physiological response to the sublime and the beautiful. The picturesque, according to Price, activates a keen yet stable curiosity to investigate nature in depth. Certainly Mason’s internal “festivity” does not hold the same connotation as the shock of sublimity. That said, combining energetic “festivity” and calm “placidity” does seem a milder version of, or at least, akin to stabilizing sublime reaction by beautiful serenity to engender a piquant inquiry of one’s environment. Mason’s experience exhibits a balanced aesthetic moment that generates curious agency within her, leading her “thoughts” “naturally” to locate the origin of her “comfort.” This incident very well could be called picturesque in character. Mason blends activated energies with serenity to acquire a middle-ground potency which sharpens her perceptivity, imagination, and intellect. In essence, picturesque transaction endows her with a sense of self-possession, galvanizes her agency, and assures her “comfort.”

Wollstonecraft creates a similar moment in her first novel, Mary, A Fiction, published the same year as Original Stories. As a child, the eponymous heroine of this short fiction confronts and assuages her own solitude: “Neglected in every respect, and left to the operations of her own mind, [Mary] considered every thing that came under her inspection, and learned to think” (1.10). Like Mason, this young Mary ponders “a separate state” of being, a spiritual world of angels to whom she would sing “tunes of her
own composing” while sitting amongst “a thick wood in the park” (1.10). Mary, like Mason, also searches nature for “the Great First Cause” and nurses “sensibility,” “[s]ublime ideas,” and “devotional sentiments” to form a better knowledge of divine “wisdom and goodness” (1.11). Mason and Mary each invest in their own subjective maturation, combining moments of active response and tranquil repose, that “festivity within” and “placidity without,” in order to locate a fuller sense of self as it relates to the larger universe. Regrettably, though, Mary’s situation ends in a disheartening marriage, where her relief is found only by managing “small farms” and other country “occupations” (1.73). Mason, the adult counterpart, seeks perhaps to intercept and prevent such circumscription of either Caroline or Mary. Sitting with the girls beneath this shaded wood, Mason now fully owning her capabilities and her weaknesses shares with the girls what had been the growth of her mind and being. And it is her past acknowledgement and acceptance of interior and exterior dynamics, the “festivity within . . . placidity without,” that advanced Mason’s confident resolve.

Mason is an exemplary model who demonstrates a disinterested poise, critical reflection, and guides her charges towards like knowledge. Yet readers have varied in their reception of her character. Given her rather harsh series of stories, Mason has been deemed a “monstrous creation” and “new kind of nightmare” (Barry 116; Lucas xii-xiii qtd in Myers “Impeccable,” 41). Certainly Mason’s statement to Caroline and Mary on cruelty to insects is peculiar: “I am stronger than you—yet I do not kill you” (4.368). Further chilling is her oft-referenced decision to terminate an injured lark that has shattered wings and a broken leg before the girls’ eyes: “[Mason] put her foot on the bird’s head, turning her own another way” (4.369). Convincing arguments, however,
consider the dynamics of Mason as surrogate mother-maternal teacher. Myers praises her as “the book’s vital center,” a “heroic exemplar” of the “mother-mentor” (Myers “Impeccable” 39, 45). “Mason inducts her charges into the world of experience” and teaches, albeit in difficult ways, “rational reflection and religion, self-command and charity, ‘strength of mind’ and a humanitarian maternal ethic,” contends Myers (42). Kelly adds that Mason is “the key to Original Stories” and stands as “the most fully realized character” . . . with a wide range of experience and full subjectivity” (64, 66). Indeed Mason’s plotted lessons and eventual disclosure of interior struggles are emblematic of schematic counsel that is yet personalized.

As the maternal pedagogue, Mason guides her charges carefully and thoughtfully through an intimate examination of surrounding environs. She demonstrates how to analyze minute features of the natural world and particular circumstances wrought by humanity, both good and bad. She illustrates how to interact, read, and interpret outside and inside conditions critically. Further, she exemplifies how to maintain a disinterested eye of observation that is yet connected to and aware of its own subjective partialities, internal pressures, and those unavoidable dynamics—political or otherwise—shared by many individuals. While at times austere, Mason ultimately offers herself as model to follow. Certainly, as Myers and others have noted, Blake’s depiction of Mason on the frontispiece with arms outstretched before the girls intimates a Christ-like figure. Mason cares for her keep and gracefully offers means of restitution. As provider, she shares her perspective, her ways, and herself as an example of how to live in and engage this world. Slowly revealing her true cast of mind to the girls and reader, Mason admits personal
difficulty but also illustrates a well-regulated, functional, and productive person in both heart and mind.

From the start, Mason establishes a perspective that she carries throughout her conversations: the natural world resembles divine order and the authority of a “Supreme Being.” To her, nature illustrates the “perfections” of God in varying patterns and multiple curiosities. The microcosm is reflective and symbolic of a divine macrocosm. Alan Liu has shown that picturesque aesthetes of the late eighteenth century invested natural paradigms with religiosity, moving their practiced faith from the church to the landscape. “Picturesque arrest was evacuated liturgy” (Liu 87). The aesthetic offered a domain for religious reflections and insinuations outside of the realm of organized faith. Interestingly, as Liu points out, both Gilpin and Thomas West, author of the popular 1778 Guide to the Lakes, were clergymen (87). Connoisseurs and enthusiasts exalted a new mode of reform and praised the picturesque for its alleged curative power (Liu 87-88). Consider Gilpin’s statement: “[E]very admirer of picturesque beauty, is an admirer also of the beauty of virtue . . . Nature is but a name for an effect, / Whose cause is God [sic]” (47). Or, consider West’s remark in his Guide: “Whoever takes a walk into these scenes, will return penetrated with a sense of the creator’s power and unsearchable wisdom” (Guides 4-5, qtd in Liu 88). Price too believed that the picturesque through “active curiosity” opens the mind “loosening those iron bonds” which strap cognitive facility (87). Likewise Knight finds the aesthetic will “Expand, exalt, and purify the soul” (Bk.I.375). Although these statements, except for West’s, came several years after Original Stories was published, this same reformative view of nature exists in Wollstonecraft’s aesthetic pedagogy. Encircled by Dissenting Unitarians like Richard
Price and James and Hannah Burgh and reading Rousseau’s *Émile* in the late 1780s, Wollstonecraft certainly had the subjects of divine providence, rational morality, and empirical education on her mind. Further her familiarity with Thompson’s *Seasons*, Young’s *Night Thoughts*, and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* shaped her awareness of nature’s aesthetic potency to stimulate and greatly affect individual mood and perception (Todd 60).

Wollstonecraft confirms a contemporary fascination that viewed aesthetic moments as powerful events which move and affect people in some fashion. Where Gilpin, Price, and Knight find the picturesque leads toward curious thrills in the imagination, intellect, and spirit, Wollstonecraft presents a less ebullient and more humble aesthetic reaction. She too treats the picturesque as a natural phenomenon characterized by variety, unadorned simplicity, rusticity, and marked by time and ruggedness. Yet if the natural world is for Wollstonecraft a divinely endowed space, then the picturesque moment represents a natural event bestowed to humanity by that divinity. This organic aesthetic holds, for her, a God-given capacity to enlighten individuals. Wollstonecraft thus treats aesthetic topoi as highly charged elements which, if rightly applied, can reform human understanding. Subscribing to Lockean philosophy, Wollstonecraft finds that sense impression, association of ideas, and habituation form knowledge and are hence ideal tools for education. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she asserts: “Education thus only supplies the man of genius with knowledge to give variety and contrast to his associations, but there is an habitual association of ideas, that grows ‘with our growth,’ which has a great effect on the moral character of mankind” (*WMW*, 5.186). Like Mason in her striking tales of pleasantries and
destinations, Wollstonecraft seeks to reform readers by way of an aesthetic pedagogical experience.

In *Original Stories*, picturesque tropes throw into sharp relief truths about exterior and interior conditions. The aesthetic incites curiosity, critical inquiry, and concern for self and others by highlighting how interior and exterior pressures are dynamics all endure. At times, the picturesque underscores illustrative allegories and bright exemplars; other times it connotes harsh realities and pernicious causes. Physical environments are, in other words, available as texts to be read. For Wollstonecraft, external factors generate symbols and impressions regarding human circumstances. Likewise, human subjects produce signifiers and leave traces upon given terrains of their own characteristics, preferences, needs, and understanding. The picturesque for Wollstonecraft localizes these transactions. Wollstonecraft aims to engage audiences intimately and fruitfully beyond what sentimental effusion or cold reasoning might offer. Her aesthetic delineations thus foreground correlations between exteriority and interiority in an effort to provide an improving perspective. Wollstonecraft further advances a well-tempered balance between feeling and thought, offering her own infused blend of rational sensibility.
CHAPTER 3

An Aesthetic Space for Enlightening Measure in Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*

Similar to *Original Stories, Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) foregrounds an empirical mode of enlightenment. Wollstonecraft, like Mason, offers her audience immediate responses to and perspectives on various sensate moments. “I, therefore, determined to let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained,” she writes, “relating the effect different objects had produced on my mind and feelings, whilst the impression was still fresh” (7.241). Wollstonecraft finds that the “most essential service . . . authors could render to society” is “to promote inquiry and discussion” so as to cultivate future generations: “[A] spirit of inquiry is the characteristic of the present century, from which the succeeding will . . . receive a great accumulation of knowledge” (7.266). Adding to this “accumulation of knowledge,” Wollstonecraft invests her aesthetic style with direct insights and probing inferences so as to stimulate critical reflection in her readership. Rather than confine her reader, most likely an armchair traveler, to illusory or inflated conceptions of other lands and people, Wollstonecraft sought instead to make *Letters* “useful” for readers, “avoiding those details” which are merely “insipid” or irrelevant (7.241). She participates in her century’s “spirit of inquiry” by offering herself as a model of the inquisitive subject: “I found I could not avoid being continually the first person – ‘the little hero of each tale’” (7.241). Yet, interestingly, it is within the aesthetic space of *Letters* where Wollstonecraft renders comments serviceable to readers. She offers picturesque descriptions and related reflections that not only amuse or delight but also, more importantly, instruct.
As aforementioned, Elizabeth Bohls convincingly shows how Wollstonecraft revises standard picturesque tropes by investing aesthetic sites with the material and economic circumstances of places she visited (158-59). Wollstonecraft indeed deviates from conventional practices and humanizes aesthetic tropes of the picturesque as demonstrated in *Original Stories*. However, she uses this reformist vision of the picturesque to illustrate and comment on the symbiotic exchange between exterior domains and interior perspectives.

Wollstonecraft utilizes the picturesque moment in *Letters* as an opportunity to investigate the relationship between the physical world and subjective domains. The picturesque is the paradigmatic context for an inquiry she stages on how exterior forces and interior perceptions mutually determine human agency and understanding. Wollstonecraft uses this aesthetic as a critical framework to demonstrate how individuals must negotiate exterior persuasions and interior proclivities carefully. As in *Original Stories*, she utilizes the picturesque to spotlight exemplary and non-exemplary situations, highlighting noble and ignoble attributes she finds are relative to subjective improvement. Wollstonecraft, in effect, delivers to her readership a revised aesthetic material endowed with illuminating conceits.

Given the eighteenth-century vogue for travel literature, *Letters* was a fairly lucrative endeavor for Wollstonecraft. From the Grand Tour to trade and exploration to the wandering subjects of fiction and non-fiction, travel held a significant place in the eighteenth century (Buzard 37). Tourist demographics markedly evolved across the century as did the style and content of travel literature, which came to be situated between “formal and learned” and “personal and familiar” discourse (Kelly 177).¹ Travel
literature ranged from texts on science, philosophy, and aesthetic theorizing to picturesque tour books, sentimental literature, and epistolary fictions (Kelly 177). With the “novelization” of the travelogue, notably seen in Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, travel writing joined the trend of literary sensibility (Kelly 178). Whether fictive, non-fictive, or a combination of both, narratives became personalized, showcasing tourists’ emotions and the “quotidian details” of scenes visited (Kelly 178; Franklin 155). Style too often evinced an “informal tone” and “episodic,” “desultory” structure rather than the formal, learned discourse of politics, business, or philosophy (Bohls 149; Kelly 178; Franklin 155).

Wollstonecraft was familiar with this genre, having reviewed many pieces of travel literature for the *Analytical Review*, including Hester Lynch Piozzi’s *Observations and Reflections, Made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy, and Germany* (1789) and Helen Maria Williams’ *Letters written in France* (1790). In the former, she commends Piozzi’s “amusing anecdotes” and “lively manner” yet laments her “frivolous superficial remarks” (7.109-10). Wollstonecraft rather prefers the “interesting unaffected” and “truly feminine” letters of Williams, in which “an air of sincerity runs through the descriptive part” (7.322). For Wollstonecraft, reflections grounded by honest feeling and genuine thought matter in public literary demonstrations. In her own epistolary travelogue, which admittedly was “designed for publication,” she thus combines her affection and intellect becoming as, Franklin notes, a “traveler-philosopher” (7.241; 155).

Wollstonecraft’s decision to use the epistolary form was an effective means in itself for conveying enlightening reflection. A published “letter is not a private document” but rather a “public” medium holding “educational power” in its very “form”
(Favret 107). Seemingly private, the letter invites curiosity and close attentive reading and subtly digests thoughts, concerns, and/or revelations to its reader. Wollstonecraft makes her own *Letters* particularly titillating by addressing each epistle to an unnamed, intimate recipient. Compiled shortly after her return from the continent in October 1795, *Letters* draws from journal entries and correspondence she kept with her estranged lover, Gilbert Imlay, while she was abroad. Given their disintegrating relationship and her financial dependence on Imlay, Wollstonecraft saw *Letters* as an enterprise that might gain her fiscal autonomy. “I am writing for independence,” she explains to Hamilton Rowan (qtd in Favret 98; *CLMW*, 338). Although *Letters* is quite reflective in tone, the purpose of Wollstonecraft’s journey was business. Imlay had granted her power of attorney, as “my best friend and wife,” to negotiate settlement of a lawsuit regarding his lost ship carrying £3,500 in silver, the *Maria and Margaretha*, named after Wollstonecraft and her maid (qtd in Franklin 147).

Published by Joseph Johnson in January 1796, *Letters* received immediate acclaim from contemporary readers. Considering the renown of Wollstonecraft’s two *Vindications*, her very “name was a selling point, a literary commodity” (Franklin 158). The *Monthly Review* praised “the author’s cool and settled judgment” (*MR* 20 1796:251; qtd in Favret 128). She “claims the traveller’s privilege of speaking frequently of herself” (*MR* 252; qtd in Myers “Letters,” 165). Similarly the *Analytical Review* named Wollstonecraft an “ingenious and justly admired writer” with “talents . . . far above the ordinary level” (*AR* 23 1796:229; qtd in Franklin 163). And in a letter to friend Joseph Cottle, Robert Southey writes: “She has made me in love with a cold climate, and frost and snow, with a northern moonlight” (qtd in Wardle 256). It is Wollstonecraft’s vivid
exploration and commentary on such “climates” and her aesthetic delineations of interior and exteriors domains to which now I would like to turn.

Wollstonecraft first introduces the picturesque in atypical fashion. She pairs the aesthetic with an uncustomary feeling: uneasiness. Recall that for a late eighteenth-century audience the term “picturesque” connoted thoughts of tranquility, mirth, and delightful surprise. Yet, as shown in Original Stories, Wollstonecraft often departs from such patterns. When sailing into “the most picturesque bay” outside Gothenburg, for example, she squares aesthetic tropes against apprehensive feelings. She does so to create an aesthetic threshold that foregrounds her own mode of critical perspective—an analytical inquiry with a heightened perceptivity which investigates situational details thoroughly. Stepping foot on a “little island,” Wollstonecraft notes the rustic “sight of two old men,” “their wretched hut,” and “[s]carcely human appearance,” all of which unconventionally elicits a sense of “alarm” (7.244). Sailing further on, she admits to “growing uneasy” about the sailors’ “too visible” fatigue. Despite their jovial spirits, the “pleasant” weather, and a “grand” coastline, she confesses her “anxiety increased, when turning into the most picturesque bay” (7.244). This initial aesthetic deviation allows Wollstonecraft to underscore unusual features which, perhaps, might have gone undetected by a blithe traveler. What unsettles Wollstonecraft is the absence of human life on shore: “There was a solemn silence in this scene, which made itself be felt” (7.245). Yet Wollstonecraft continues to pair her discomfort against a context that would have been agreeable to most picturesque tourists and notes how the “sun-beams . . . played on the [“scarcely ruffled”] ocean” and how “huge, dark rocks” formed an immense palisade (7.244-45). Upon spotting a still “pilot’s hut” her uneasiness further
accumulates: “I should not have been very sorry if the cottage had not appeared equally tranquil” (7.245). Although fatigued by her eleven-day voyage across the North Sea, Wollstonecraft significantly chooses to spotlight a “picturesque bay,” a signifier of tranquility which here noticeably fails to divert, assuage, or dispel her anxiety (7.244). Rather the very placidity and “silence” of the moment aggravate Wollstonecraft’s angst (7.245).

Juxtaposing a picturesque moment against uneasiness allows Wollstonecraft to underscore and elaborate upon what exactly creates this incongruous feeling: the lack of any curious local or inspection of her and Marguerite, newcomers to this land (7.245). The absence of inquiring residents, which causes a “silence” that fittingly matches the “scarcely ruffled” ocean, encourages Wollstonecraft to assess how curiosity benefits humanity. Given the locals’ strange reticence, she ascertains that they fail to possess the “imagination” and “curiosity necessary to fructify the faint glimmerings of mind which entitles them to rank as lords of creation” (7.245). Mental agility distinguishes mankind from brute creatures, suggests Wollstonecraft, and further provides people with a sense of ownership over what they construct, cultivate, and establish—becoming true “lords of creation.” For Wollstonecraft curiosity activates human industry and in turn sophisticates social behaviors, cultural standards, and living conditions. Praising the French, she notes the Parisians’ “fondness” for “novelty” and “curiosity” which, unlike these “sluggish inhabitants,” exemplifies progress towards “refinement” and an improved “art of living” (7.245). From this picturesque moment, Wollstonecraft translates an odd, anxious arrest into profound reflection on a subjective property—curiosity—an agent which for her significantly advances civilization. This interchange also allows Wollstonecraft to
exemplify a kind of critical reading and reflection that sifts through details with minute attention and resolution, regardless of momentary agitation.

Wollstonecraft also uses the picturesque to demonstrate how subjective perspective is often a decided position based upon physical actions and mental associations a person chooses to make. She illustrates how individuals can construct their own mood, perception, and sense of agency by way of associations one keeps. She continues to tour the area surrounding this “commodious bay,” indicating how exterior impressions attend to interior needs. Weary from travel and from her deteriorating relationship with Imlay, Wollstonecraft explains how “picturesque beauty” at this site assuages her own consternation (7.247). While this altered reaction may seem an abrupt contradiction from her prior uneasiness, this change emphasizes how Wollstonecraft actively focuses and ruminates upon new environments. Beth Dolan Kautz points out that Wollstonecraft treats “picturesque travel” as an effective “antidote” for relieving melancholic depression (42). As in Original Stories, Wollstonecraft indeed employs the aesthetic as a curative agent at times to alleviate dis-ease and restore fortitude. She shows how an individual can mitigate debilitating concerns and maintain a stable perspective by stimulating the mind with sanguine impressions.

However, at Gothenburg Wollstonecraft also stresses the merit of personal initiative, of taking responsibility for one’s own state of mind. She presents “a picture of self-reliance” and determined resolve, underscoring her own self-sufficient functionality (Favret 102-3). With a discriminating eye, Wollstonecraft then deliberately locates picturesque features that calm her distressed spirit. Scoffing the poor “balm” of Imlay’s letters upon sight of “heart’s ease,” she immediately juxtaposes this “cruel remembrance”
against a verdant scene that mollifies her anxiety (7.247). Although the “view” of piled rocks along the shore looked “sterile,” Wollstonecraft remarks: “still little patches of earth, of the most exquisite verdure, enameled with the sweetest wild flowers, seemed to promise the goats and a few straggling cows luxurious herbage” (7.247). Like Mason, Wollstonecraft finds such “exquisite” and “luxurious” nourishment an empowering symbol that counteracts cold, “sterile” perspectives by way of abundant provision. Jeanne Moskal observes how the “generative categories of fertility and sterility” inform Wollstonecraft’s picturesque descriptions, how in the process she deflates Burkean tropes of sublimity to defend maternal affection and the powers of the female observer (278). Thus, her aesthetic language underlines productivity and procreation. Kautz adds too that the “picturesque beauty” at Gothenburg holds abundant, “salutary” power for Wollstonecraft (43). Indeed, the “silent and peaceful” scene yields fecund sensations of tranquility and joy which restore and invigorate Wollstonecraft’s spirit. “I gazed around with rapture,” she writes, “and felt more of that spontaneous pleasure which gives credibility to our expectation of happiness” (7.247). Painful memories like “the horrors . . . witnessed in France” or melancholy from repeated disappointment decrease as a corollary of viewing picturesque “verdure” (7.247). Wollstonecraft aggressively identifies healthy prospects in an effort to allay oppressive angst which interferes with her personal balance and agency. Perception for her is relative to a person’s position and decided action. Further along she writes:

I walked on, still delighted with the rude beauties of the scene; for the sublime often gave place imperceptibly to the beautiful, dilating the emotions which were painfully concentrated. (7.247)
Wollstonecraft presents herself focusing strategically on life-bearing details to mitigate the anxiety she keeps. These “rude” and rugged “beauties” bear and seamlessly conjoin the sublime and beautiful and, again, intimate a picturesque transaction (Kautz 42). “Wollstonecraft composes a landscape in which sublimity and beauty are not just contiguous but interspersed,” comments Moskal (277). It is from this picturesque amalgam of the “sublime” and “beautiful” that Wollstonecraft’s well-being revitalizes: “I would gladly have rambled about [the countryside] much longer, my senses had been so awake, and my imagination still continued so busy” (7.248). Indeed picturesque therapy relieves her anxiety,reactivates her energy, and renews her functionality. Yet this sequence is a byproduct of her decision to scope out elements that effectually would pacify apprehensions. Wollstonecraft exhibits how calculated discernment and an aesthetic opportunity can generate a productive exchange.

Wollstonecraft further analyzes the two constituent forces of the picturesque—the sublime and the beautiful—in an effort to demonstrate the effect particular aesthetics have on a person’s sense of balance. She explains how the country tour at Gothenburg incited lively reflections that woke her early the next day. Her sleeplessness quickly cycles back into uneasiness, however, as she realizes that her disposition sharply contrasts the surrounding tranquility: “I contemplated all nature at rest; the rocks, even grown darker in their appearance, looked as if they partook of the general repose . . . What, I exclaimed, is this active principle which keeps me still awake?” (7.248). While “every thing” seemed at ease, including her daughter Fanny who sleeps “with equal calmness,” anxious thoughts regarding “home” and “society” flood Wollstonecraft’s mind only to rouse reactions akin to sublime tension, disabling the balance she achieved
earlier: “[E]motions that trembled on the brink of extacy [sic] and agony gave a poignancy to my sensations which made me feel more alive than usual” (7.248). In retrospect, she confesses that her “imperious sympathies,” her penchant for “melancholy and even misanthropy,” actually debilitates her agency and disrupts her calmness. In effect, she intimates that people should negotiate internal proclivities or habits carefully (7.248). During such times, Wollstonecraft admits: “I have then considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind” (7.249). Interestingly, what grounds her on this morning from terrifying isolation is a response similar to that engendered by the beautiful: “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” (7.249). This “involuntary sympathetic emotion” suggests a relaxing reflex, like that which the beautiful elicits. Given that she is holding Fanny, one might wonder if this “involuntary” sympathy derives from maternal affection. As Moskal indicates, the beautiful acts as a nurturing agent which softens and soothes sublime forces, a power Wollstonecraft often accentuates as seen in her constructions of “the benevolent maternal picturesque landscape” (277, 288). As this “involuntary” sympathy thus adheres to and subdues the prior “extacy and agony” of sublimity, the total sensual experience at the macro-level very well could be termed a picturesque event. Contained in the same span of time one morn, the sublime gives way to the beautiful creating a paradoxical moment wherein emotional strain coalesces with placid sensation to balance the individual, Wollstonecraft, experiencing these persuasive powers. Wollstonecraft breaks down a total picturesque moment, highlighting the power of sublime and beautiful forces to show how these aesthetic energies mutually—in the form of the picturesque—balance a subject’s
perspective. This composite event underscores the importance of steadying ecstatic fervor and retaining a sense of repose. While certain aesthetic reactions may pique excitement and even sharpen sensation—as Wollstonecraft admits, she herself felt “more alive” from her country tour—equilibrium is necessary to maintain lucid perspective.

Wollstonecraft also uses the aesthetic as a framing device, as in *Original Stories*, to spotlight the close correlation between sensible reflection and poignant feeling. As Kautz points out, “embedded” in *Letters* is Wollstonecraft’s “desire to find a balance between rational thought and powerful emotion” (37). Traveling to Larvik, for instance, Wollstonecraft situates shrewd commentary inside a picturesque description. Her remarks lay out in formulaic fashion her understanding of the relationship between the mind and the emotions. Wollstonecraft establishes a picturesque context first by noting the “very fine” road, “best cultivated” countryside, the “long and lank” beech trees, and “stately [yet “beautiful”] pine” (7.289). A critically reflective aside follows, and the account ends with a continued description of a “grove of towering beech” (7.289). Wollstonecraft’s brief digression substantiates, however, the emotive forces of human nature by showing how feeling can derive from a cultivated, rational mind. Prior to depicting the “towering beech,” she informs the reader: “my very reason obliges me to permit my feelings to be my criterion.” She continues: “Whatever excites emotion has charms for me” (7.289). One might expect a highly emotional response on the beech grove to follow given that Wollstonecraft licenses her charmed “feelings” to guide her reflections. Yet, she modifies the latter statement—“Whatever excites emotion has charms for me”—by appending a theoretical aside to this clause. In effect, she accounts for the source of her sensibility: a cultivated mind. She writes:
Whatever excites emotion has charms for me; though I insist that the
cultivation of the mind, by warming, nay almost creating the imagination,
produces taste, and an immense variety of sensations and emotions,
partaking of the exquisite pleasure inspired by beauty and sublimity.

(7.289)

Interestingly enough, this comment evinces the same kind of systematic, rational
thorizing as Burke, Gilpin, Price, or Knight might put forward. Note how she speaks in
absolute phrases: “the cultivation of the mind . . . produces taste, and an immense variety
of sensation and emotions.” This tone insinuates that her definition is universal and
applies to mankind as a whole. Not only does she validate her own “feelings” by
interpolating critical reflection but she also validates human feeling, in general. For
Wollstonecraft, reason shapes feeling regardless of who the subject might be. When she
states “we reason deeply, when we forcibly feel,” she focuses on the plural, on the
inclusive, not the singular (7.325). 3

After substantiating her emotion, Wollstonecraft describes the beech grove,
modeling for the reader a balanced, analytical perspective. She notes precisely how the
“airy lightness of . . . foliage” and a certain “degree of sunshine” give the leaves the
“appearance” of “transparency,” “freshness,” and “elegance” (7.289). Such “evanescent
graces,” she remarks, “seemed the effect of enchantment” and remind her of “Italian
scenery” (7.289-90). While Wollstonecraft enjoys the pleasure of this aesthetic moment,
she clearly acknowledges that certain attributes create certain effects. Although the leaves
appear transparent, she recognizes how their material substance plus sunlight produce an
optical illusion. Delighting in the moment she admits: “I imperceptibly breathed softly,
lest I should destroy what was real, yet looked so like the creation of fancy” (7.290). Yet what is “real” here is the physical illusion of transparent foliage which she affirms only “looked . . . like the creation of fancy.” Wollstonecraft validates human feeling by way of a rational aside to demonstrate her subsequent delight from an analytically grounded, yet sensually receptive, position.

Further exploring how physical environs affect human behavior, Wollstonecraft applies picturesque tropes to examine how certain conditions trigger individual habits and social proclivities. Early in her travels through Sweden, she visits a collection of “scattered huts” made of “rudely hewn” logs and built on a “craggy foundation” where, she notes, “there scarcely appears a vestige of cultivation” (7.253). Rather than celebrate the coarse and “craggy” details of this site, Wollstonecraft underscores the residential reality: a bleak existence of limited victuals. Bohls points out that Wollstonecraft demonstrates a “concern with the material conditions of everyday life,” showing how people “adapt” to their circumstance, and what their “materially grounded quality” of life entails (152, 154). Bohls asserts that *Letters* repeatedly defies convention to place the human beings who live on and from the land at the center of its representation” (154). Wollstonecraft relocates human subjects and their living conditions within the picturesque frame, moving them from the distance or side-screen to the foreground. The log “huts” she notes, metonymic of their tenants, noticeably “stand shivering on the naked rocks, braving the pitiless elements” (7.253). Given such austere conditions, she shows no surprise that locals indulge in the “churlish pleasure of drinking drams” in “place of social enjoyments” (7.253). Their behavior follows from their environmental condition. Associated with this cold domain, labor and sex relations similarly are
egregious, physical sights (7.253). Here “a man may strike a man with impunity because he pays him wages” meanwhile women servants alone are burdened with washing linens in icy water until their “hands . . . are cracked and bleeding” (7.253). Wollstonecraft inverts the delightful associations of rugged and uncultivated terrain and rather emphasizes how crude circumstances negatively impact human behavior and social interactions and limit opportunities for more agreeable society.

Touring the “picturesquely wild” location of East Risør, Wollstonecraft also considers how regional paradigms and perspectives forcibly shape human potential for improvement. “Talk not of bastilles!” she writes of the town’s rocky declivities, “To be born here, was to be bastilled by nature, shut out from all that opens the understanding, or enlarges the heart” (7.295). Risør’s physically constrictive environment—its “two hundred houses crowded together, under a very high rock,” “[h]uddled one behind another,” with a limited view of the sea—contributes to residential vulgarities like drunkenness, deceit, and gambling (7.295). Wollstonecraft again applies the notion that exteriority aligns with interiority and concludes that “the most genial and humane characters,” unlike these present tenants, are “alive to the sentiments inspired by tranquil country scenes” (7.296). Descending a craggy path, she details how unhealthy “confinement” characterizes the region: “The ocean, and . . . tremendous bulwarks, enclosed me on every side” (7.295). From this narrow vista, “only a boundless waste of water” can be seen while neither “smiling nature” nor “a patch of lively green [are visible] to relieve the aching sight, or vary the objects of meditation” (7.295). Rather dilapidated homes, coarse pathways, and uncultivated land befoul the town’s topography. Wollstonecraft finds that such harsh settings likely debilitate human agency, leaving
residents in “the solitude of ignorance,” to know and see “so little” of the outside world. “I felt my breath oppressed,” she admits (7.295). From this “picturesquely wild” ground, Wollstonecraft illustrates how localized perspective will either vitalize or enervate, improve or impair, human sensibilities which shape understanding and refine social behavior.

Flexibility and variety in perspective are, however, necessary components that enable agency and subjective stability for Wollstonecraft. Fittingly, her final description of Risør contradicts her previous criticism. Prior to leaving the region, Wollstonecraft lauds the “view of the town” as “now extremely fine” and notes “calm” and “picturesquely beautiful” details (7.297). This discrepancy reiterates that perspective is supple and relative to experience. Wollstonecraft’s changed attitude results from several factors: a shift in physical location and a new association of ideas. When she first describes the region as “picturesquely wild,” she places herself immediately within the context of rocky declivities and decrepit grounds. Her proximity to crude details and coarse locals negatively affects her perception of Risør. Her latter comments are based, though, on viewing the town from afar along a slightly different section of the coast.

Sailing one evening just off Risør, she enjoys the sight of the “huge rocky mountain,” “vast cliff,” “clumps of pines,” and a “steeple” not previously mentioned (7.297). While she does not change her opinion about the residents, she alters her perception of their stony habitation. “I am become better reconciled to them [the rocks] since I climbed their craggy sides, last night,” she writes (133). The pleasant sounds of a French horn echoing off the same chasms she had abhorred shift her perspective. “Spirits unseen seemed to walk abroad, and flit from cliff to cliff, to soothe my soul to peace,” observes
Wollstonecraft (7.297). What once seemed oppressive now stirs her imagination, emanates calming sensations, and amends her prior dislike of Risør’s terrain: “I could scarcely have imagined that a simple object, rocks, could have admitted of so many interesting combinations – always grand, and often sublime” (7.298). Wollstonecraft illustrates how framed perspective and corresponding associations matter when an individual receives information and forms conceptions about a given place or event. Moreover, she underscores the importance of engaging a context from multiple angles and experiences to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of a particular circumstance.

Wollstonecraft also uses picturesque motifs to demonstrate how to engage appealing subject matter by analyzing material content and aesthetic purpose carefully. Using the trope of gothic ruins, she encourages readers to re-examine how grand, intriguing, or impressive moments garner such attributes. Visiting an “old” church in Tønsberg that “has a gothic respectability about it,” she soon finds reason not to be enchanted by the edifice (7.277). Inside, she explains, stood “a little recess full of coffins” that contained “embalmed” cadavers, a sight “worse than natural decay,” which filled her “with disgust and horror” (7.278). Despite ostensible “respectability,” the church’s gothic “grandeur” derives instead from “human petrifactions” enclosed inside (7.277-78). Given this “treason against humanity,” the aged church evokes abject repulsion for Wollstonecraft rather than reverence: “[F]or nothing is so ugly as the human form when deprived of life, and thus dried to stone, merely to preserve the most disgusting image of death” (7.278-79). Wollstonecraft asks readers to look beyond exterior attractions and investigate thoroughly sites and impressions which at first glance
might proffer unwarranted merit. These putrid findings at the church adulterate for her the establishment’s symbolic function. Aged structures hold a moral purpose for her and ought to incite profound thought by recalling poignant events in history: “The contemplation of noble ruins produces a melancholy that exalts the mind. – We take a retrospect of the exertions of man, the fate of empires and their rulers” (7.279). Whether signifying “the grand destruction of ages” or “the necessary change of time,” ruins should encourage “improvement.” “Our very soul expands” upon sight of noble remains, contends Wollstonecraft (7.279). Yet, here, these mummified bodies with “teeth, nails, and skin” wholly intact have been “sacrilegiously handled,” which perverts the church’s “respectability” and further points out “vain attempts” of the deceased to escape “decay” and gain “distinction” (7.279).

Shifting from this “gothic” church at Tønsberg, Wollstonecraft expands her point on aesthetic purpose by inserting a comparison to the aged chapel at Windsor, giving her criticism immediacy to the homeland. Once “calculated to inspire” sublime sentiments, this English sanctuary has been newly “whitewashed” and currently appears in a “nice, clean state,” explains Wollstonecraft (7.277). Yet, for her, these embellishments merely evince inflated “love of order in trifles, and taste for proportion and arrangement” (7.278). The aesthetic alterations are incongruous with the chapel’s sacred purpose and natural grandeur, creating now “an excellent hall for dancing or feasting” rather than for worship or prayer, remarks Wollstonecraft (7.278). Improvements should match structural function; otherwise, the enhancements indicate futile preoccupation on the part of the proprietor. Although Windsor “had acquired, by time, a somber hue, which accorded with the architecture,” now the chapel’s “sublimity has vanished” by way of
white-washing alterations, generating instead “ridiculous images” to amuse the mind (7.278). Commenting earlier on garden improvements, Wollstonecraft asserts: “It requires uncommon taste . . . to introduce accommodations and ornaments analogous with the surrounding scene” (7.256). Additions such as “serpentine walks,” what she sarcastically terms “the rage for the line of beauty,” should be installed for “convenience,” “exercise,” and “reflection” not for vain amusement (7.256).

Supplemental improvement and aesthetic appreciation ought to be truly useful. Wollstonecraft’s comments in Tønsberg and asides on Windsor doubly emphasize the point that readers should examine alluring aesthetic moments closely, considering the full content and purpose of such persuasive occasions.

Yet Wollstonecraft is not purely utilitarian in her thinking. She certainly embraces the sensual pleasure of aesthetics as long as the effect matches a reasonable cause. In Christiania, for example, she articulates some favor in gothic ruins:

Huge gothic piles, indeed, exhibit a characteristic sublimity, and a wildness of fancy peculiar to the period when they were erected; but size, without grandeur or elegance, has an emphatical [sic] stamp of meanness, of poverty of conception, which only a commercial spirit could give.

(7.307)

It is this “poverty of conception” that Wollstonecraft wishes to avoid—the mean lack of taste, consideration, or intelligence. The “commercial spirit” she disdains involves an enterprising lust after quantity and economic gain that, in mass, sacrifices quality of life, social intellect, and creative production. Whether for public or private venture, for commercial or proprietary improvement, “convenience” without thought or taste is
“absurd” to Wollstonecraft: “If we wish to render mankind moral from principle, we must, I am persuaded, give a greater scope to the enjoyment of the senses, by blending taste with them,” states Wollstonecraft (7.307). Here “taste” refers to a pleasurable aesthetic moment proportionate to structural purpose. Wollstonecraft’s previous comments regarding the “convenience” of “serpentine walks” are linked to the sanguine enjoyment of “exercise” and “reflection.” Physical improvements, she suggests, best come from enjoyable, yet apposite, design. When usefulness and moderate proportion are attached to aesthetically impressive paradigms, social culture begins to engage in more intelligent practices versus the poorly conceived enterprise of materialistic consumption.

Bohls shows that Wollstonecraft’s aesthetics underscore the corporeal side of humanity, how labor is a realistic and vital part of the human condition. Wollstonecraft challenges “the autonomy of the aesthetic domain,” “the segregation of aesthetic from practical” and the general “anti-utilitarian bias” of eighteenth-century aestheticism (Bohls 151). Wollstonecraft departs from conventional aesthetes like Gilpin or Price who displace industry from the picturesque scope (Bohls 151). One such moment, as Bohls notes, comes when Wollstonecraft travels through Quistram. Building a standard picturesque scene, she notes details such as “mossy herbage,” a “straggling” river, “thickly wooded . . . ground,” and “variegated” “wild flowers” (7.261). Only she humorously juxtaposes this pleasant scene against the rising stench of “herring” used to manure the grounds. This odor perpetually interjects itself, albeit with ironic jest, and ruins the sensual pleasure of the moment with “signifiers of practical agricultural activity” (Bohls 151). Yet this continual smell of “detestable” fish at Quistram also symbolizes that physical industry is a recurrent, however unpleasant, lot of mankind
Labor is a repeated investment required of humanity, suggests Wollstonecraft, necessary for maintaining provisions and any cultivation towards improvement. The very potency of this sensate moment is a sharp reminder that civil advancement is not only an ongoing process but also at times necessarily bears untoward manifestations. However much the herring stench “poisoned” Wollstonecraft’s “pleasure,” such compost is what makes the ground and economy of the region more fertile. To omit such an agent would produce a barren or depressed situation. In this picturesque sketch, Wollstonecraft suggests that cultivation requires inevitable displeasures and inconveniences in order to move forward productively.

Wollstonecraft too strategically deposits verdant scenes in *Letters* to compare productive energy and fertile gains against indigence and depressed human agency. Moving beyond Quistram, she enters a territory less kind where “only poverty resided” at “small” farms scattered across rocky land. “[N]ature 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,” writes Wollstonecraft (7.262). As at Gothenburg, the inhabitants here, including “children,” barely step outside their homes for work or “sport” (7.262). Although it is summertime, “all” seems “frozen” and “dull,” and the human will to work is depressed (7.262-63). Residents appear “not willing to put sterility itself out of countenance” and consequently possess “little grain” and barren land (7.263). Wollstonecraft further impresses this image of “poverty” by inserting a lively “picturesque” description in the midst of this destitute frame. Recalling the “wild beauties of the country” visited the day before, Wollstonecraft details “fantastic” rocks, “pines and firs,” “little lakes,” and “vallies and glens, cleared of trees, [which] displayed dazzling
verdure” (7.263). What “little cultivation” she spied was yet harmonious and local inhabitants seemed to keep safe harbor and equitable relations. No tyrant landlords or “castles rear[ed] their turrets aloft to crush the cottages,” notes Wollstonecraft (7.263). Although farmers have to contend occasionally with bears that “catch” their livestock, a general “peaceful composure” characterized the scene (7.263). This lush picturesque recollection places the present destitution outside Quistram in dismal relief. Ruminating on the genesis of mankind, Wollstonecraft determines that if “nothing like cultivation attached [people] to the soil” they necessarily migrated (7.263). By inserting a picturesque vignette amid infertile terrain, Wollstonecraft insinuates that better conditions do and can exist for mankind, both in terms of physical soil and intellectual culture. However, humanity must make determined efforts to gain and cultivate productive and salubrious civilization.

Kelly posits that Wollstonecraft considered “professional intellectuals” as the “proper,” “revolutionary vanguard” of civil improvement (184). Similarly, Favret contends that in Letters Wollstonecraft “elevates a new social class: the professional, creative personality” (124). Letters’ picturesque delineations certainly intimate these conceptions as Wollstonecraft foregrounds attributes of external situations which either help or limit the betterment of various communities. She often uses the picturesque to advance principles on how to perceive and interact with the physical world intelligently—that is, how interior conceptions should relate to exterior realms. In another letter, she showcases three kinds of “picturesque” “farms” in Norway, laying out a range of different levels of social improvement. The first sketch highlights “cottages” in the more “remote parts” of Norway (7.307). Here logging previously “felled” many trees,
making it absolutely necessary to cultivate the “cleared” land (7.307). The residents had
“to spare the woods a little” and focus instead on developing “agricultural knowledge,”
explains Wollstonecraft: “Necessity will in future more and more spur them on; for the
ground, cleared of wood, must be cultivated, or the farm loses its value” (7.307-8). This
imposed “necessity” is fortunate, however, in that it motivates the residents to economize
their commercial industry and acquire useful “knowledge” which had been lacking.
“[T]his change will be universally beneficial [for them],” remarks Wollstonecraft (7.307).
She finds advantageous the fact that the residents recognized their past blunders and
present needs and altered their behavior accordingly.

In the second sketch, she highlights a “woodman’s family,” tenants to “people of
property,” where the father is “employed to cut down the wood necessary for the
household and the estate” (7.308). Here an economized situation seems already in play
given that the woodman fells only what is “necessary.” Additionally, we are told that the
proprietors themselves are “very careful of their timber” (7.308). Admiring the
“appearance” of this humble station, Wollstonecraft observes how the family hold a
kempt “little lawn” and cottage “sheltered” by the surrounding forest (7.308). However,
after describing the family’s quaint abode she poses a rather odd statement, asserting:
“and if contentment be all we can attain, it is, perhaps, best secured by ignorance”
(7.308). While “contentment” denotes calmness, ease, and satisfaction with what one has,
it also signifies a “condition, or quality of being contended,” that is, a negative state
“limiting one’s desires” with willing concession (OED). By attaching “ignorance” to
“contentment,” Wollstonecraft intimates that some critical aspect is missing from this
scene, such as knowledge. A significant word in this clause is the term “perhaps” which
is emphasized by the punctuating commas. Wollstonecraft suggests that “perhaps” “ignorance” best maintains “contentment,” yet her phrasing also hints that “perhaps” this arrangement does not necessarily provide the best social circumstance. Perhaps “contentment” and “ignorance” create unbeknown disadvantage. Further perhaps “knowledge,” as sought in the first scenario, rather than settled “ignorance,” is a better solution to enable human minds. Wollstonecraft subtly questions the social position these residents keep. She points out for example that “before the door a cow, goat, nag, and children, seemed equally content with their lot” (7.308). Placing “children” in line with livestock does not necessarily render a sense of intellectual or educational advantage. It seems that Wollstonecraft appreciates the residents’ simplicity, yet she questions their state of contentedness. Without knowledge or justifiable cause for one’s “lot,” perhaps an individual’s contentment is merely deprived or complacent understanding.

Pointing out a third paradigm, Wollstonecraft notes the well-reputed Norwegian farmers in the North, whom regrettably she cannot visit given inclement weather: “I have heard much of the intelligence of the inhabitants, substantial farmers, who have none of that cunning [of commercialism] to contaminate their simplicity” (7.308). Word of such a community recalls the very “fables of the golden age,” remarks Wollstonecraft, when mankind lived in “independence and virtue; affluence without vice; cultivation of mind, without depravity of heart; with ‘ever smiling liberty,’ the nymph of the mountain” (7.308). This group maintains an idealized situation, one which Wollstonecraft longs to see, where human industry is intelligent, productive, yet balanced. Simpler ways and honesty—these farmers have no tolerance for “fraud”—fortify equitable social relations and a shared value system in the community (7.308).
Across this picturesque triptych, Wollstonecraft underscores the merit of industrious behavior, smart economizing, and the acquisition of knowledge to secure social and intellectual standing. She advocates the physical and mental advantages of smart labor, sensual delight, and the profits of tasteful cultivation. In the first scenario, Wollstonecraft depicts a community working to improve past wrongs, yet it is still in the process of fixing error, gaining knowledge, and cultivating change. The second scenario, while pleasant, questions the very “lot” of contentment, the sheer acceptance of place without knowledge of socio-economic or educational (dis)advantage. The third picture, however, offers a hypothetical possibility for what could be attained, what could be mastered or achieved by humanity: an intelligent and “substantial” use of land and relation to community.

Kelly suggests that Wollstonecraft views the humble “lower-class . . . as a potential source of revolutionary social transformation” (186). The rustic space becomes a rather opportune juncture for her to highlight commendable features and spotlight missing elements using a popular aesthetic scope to do so. It seems too that she attempts to regain a kind of georgic tradition in her use of the picturesque, underscoring the merit of human industry and earnest repose. Her aesthetic interests promote a kind of balanced industriousness that is yet economically useful, aesthetically pleasant, and intelligently conceived. Ralph Wardle comments that Wollstonecraft “sought evidence” in the places she visited of the “endless march of civilization” (251). She avidly records exemplary and non-exemplary scenarios in *Letters* that she hopes will enlighten her readership as to the state of mankind. Wollstonecraft believed in the perfectibility of humanity and saw herself as an agent marking out progress towards that refinement. “[C]ivilization,” she
writes, “is a blessing not sufficiently estimated by those who have not traced its progress” (7.250). Yet, Wollstonecraft also understood the power of aesthetics to garner attention, bestow knowledge, and facilitate reaction. By contemporary standards, picturesque delineations allegedly stoked curiosity and, as Wollstonecraft admits, “curiosity . . . is the forerunner of improvement” (7.276). Thus, adopting her own humanized version of the picturesque, she found a suitable paradigm popular to the day in which to invest her own critical perspective, insights, and speculations.

Wollstonecraft elects the picturesque as her preferred aesthetic for concentrating on issues that pertain to the development of human understanding. She stages an inquiry on the correlation between exterior forces and interior persuasions and proclivities, seeking to explain and understand better these two symbiotic domains. In the process, she underscores the merit of curiosity, the merit of keeping an analytical yet emotionally receptive perspective, and points out how perceptions are often self-determined acts. She further spotlights the relationship between aesthetic purpose and material content, highlighting the need for apposite design and critical consumption of aesthetic products. For Wollstonecraft, civilization depends on humankind recognizing its relation to the physical world, to the environment and tangible earthly creations. The picturesque becomes a measure by which she explores how regional paradigms and residential initiatives shape opportunities and disadvantages and effectually determine the state of present and future improvements. *Letters*, a characteristically picturesque travelogue, utilizes the highly charged space of aesthetic description to intrigue readers and bestow critical reflections and curious inquiries.
CONCLUSION

If the eighteenth-century novel, as Armstrong posits, disseminated the concept of individual subjectivity, then aesthetic content was a crucial power inside texts that distinguished the terms of, and relationship between, exteriority and interiority. While texts may inform readers by way of rhetorical persuasion, it is often aesthetic devices that cogently deliver and secure those impressions. From her early commentary in the *Analytical Review* to her debate with Edmund Burke, it is clear that Wollstonecraft understood the power of aesthetic language. And it is this same power that she administers within her own writing so as to counter patrician ideologies that had subjugated voices in the body politic. However, to modify societal structures and cultural practices, Wollstonecraft first seeks to educate her readership by offering enlightening alternatives and ways of thinking contrary to hegemonic conventions that had previously limited human potential. In her writing, Wollstonecraft presents vivid models of human strength and need, often integrating highly autobiographical characters and her own first-person perspective. Whether situating herself as “the little hero of each tale” or presenting the voice of surrogate figures like Mrs. Mason, Wollstonecraft incorporates aesthetic moments into the fabric of these narratives to emphasize conditions that affect human experience (*WMW*, 7.241).

Wollstonecraft offers her audience edifying junctures in aesthetic delineations, creating in effect pedagogical lessons and inquiries attached to creative utterances. Using a popular aesthetic—the picturesque—Wollstonecraft advances an empirical study on external and internal paradigms and evaluates constituent forces that influence subjective growth. She effectively stages a hermeneutic analysis of the symbiotic relationship
between exteriority and interiority, using picturesque tropes to foreground her explications. Wollstonecraft engineers aesthetic discourse to display prominently, for example, reflections on individual agency and how intellectual and social developments are impacted by surrounding environments and circumstantial experiences. The world at large and the inner self are for Wollstonecraft like texts to be scrutinized and discussed in exegetic writing. In *Original Stories and Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, she thus presents an educative sequence of picturesque sites aimed at improving readers’ subjective dispositions and social interactions.

Wollstonecraft deviates, however, from contemporary aesthetic practices which distanced the observer from the economic and material reality of landscapes visited. Rather, she invests picturesque contexts with physical and psychological details to offer her audience a more comprehensive and genuine depiction of residential determinants that affect human lives. As Alan Liu has shown, the standard picturesque rendered a moment of arrest which often wrongfully evacuated history and socio-economic realities to allow instead the sensual and intellectual gratifications of the observer to be fulfilled (63-64, 80-89, 91-95). Eighteenth-century aesthetes were fond of attaching imaginary understandings to enclosed landscapes and dispossessed regions, often emptying unpleasant contents like human industry or sources of destitution from the picturesque frame (Liu 91-100). For Wollstonecraft, however, aesthetic arrest rather enables her to zero in on human subjects and local features and agents from both past and present events that particularized conspicuous details characterizing a scene. Wollstonecraft underlines, for instance, the causes behind surface features and certain effects, indicating that issues like roughness, ruggedness, and depressed activity are not necessarily delightful
attributes. Instead, she exercises realism within her picturesque scope and further redirects her audience’s attention to substantial moments of interiority, using aesthetic terminology and descriptions to localize this movement.

Wollstonecraft seeks to record and to stimulate the progress of civilization, and, thus, in her fiction and nonfiction she illustrates how external and internal factors mutually contribute to or limit cultivation. She emphasizes in both *Original Stories* and *Letters* how human perception and knowledge are relative to gained experiences and the association of ideas one keeps and, perhaps, creates. To Wollstonecraft, all mankind possess innate faculties to actualize a better self and better community. However, as demonstrated by *Letters*, Wollstonecraft indicates that determined resolve and socio-political freedom are required in order for humankind to realize substantial improvement. She believes in the perfectibility of humanity yet also recognizes that educational and social provisions are necessary to facilitate civil progress. Mason’s “real life” lessons illustrate, for example, that people, when free, have the choice to analyze incidental settings and socio-economic issues and ruminate upon their own subjective tendencies, habits, and acquired dispositions. *Original Stories* and *Letters* each aptly apply anecdotal scenarios of noble and ignoble characters, actions, and picturesque settings so as to underscore corollaries between interior and exterior states of being. Within her own picturesque vignettes, Wollstonecraft urgently asks readers to examine closely whether social behaviors, enterprises, and material interests produce civil advantages or disadvantages.

The picturesque was, for Wollstonecraft, an efficient medium for conveying reflections on individual and societal improvements. The aesthetic ostensibly stimulates
curiosity which, for her, is an agent that activates inquiry and improves intellectual taste. She further capitalizes on the power of aesthetic pleasure to captivate audience attention and impress thoughts relative to social enlightenment. Additionally, Wollstonecraft chooses the picturesque as a paradigmatic framework since this particular aesthetic evinces, to her, a clear portrait of a writer’s cognitive ability and acute state of feeling. As demonstrated by Wollstonecraft’s *Analytical* remarks on Gilpin, she lauds aesthetic performances that illustrate sharp focus, connected thought, and a lucid presentation of one’s interior being. Thus, Wollstonecraft aspires in her own picturesque aesthetics to inculcate readers with patterns of well-regulated thinking and feeling, wherein mind and emotion are complementary domains that coalesce into what could be termed rational sensibility.

Wollstonecraft desires to liberate the way in which audiences think about material circumstances and absorb knowledge concerning the self, others, and surrounding environs. She views the writer as responsible for stimulating inquiry to provide future generations with a storehouse of gained knowledge. To Wollstonecraft, poets and authors who genuinely engaged nature with their own eyes and imaginations are endowed with the unique capacity to center readers’ thoughts and train new ways of comprehending the world and digesting information. Given this authority, aesthetic description holds for her educative possibility. Writing in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she asserts:

> The generality of the people cannot see or feel poetically, they want fancy, and therefore fly from solitude in search of sensible objects; but when an author lends them his eyes they can see as he saw, and be amused by images they could not select, though lying before them. (*WMW*, 5.186)
Wollstonecraft desires to open readers’ eyes, minds, and imaginations. She meets readers at the level of subjectivity to stimulate critical thought and feeling concerning tangible realities and psychological forces which decidedly shape human perspectives and opportunities. William Godwin observes that the “intellectual character” of his late wife significantly impacted his own rational thinking and sensibility, adding in the second edition of his *Memoirs*:

> A companion like this, excites and animates the mind. From such an [sic] one we imbibe . . . the habit of minutely attending to first impressions, and justly appreciating them. Her taste awakened mine; her sensibility determined me to a careful development of my feelings. She delighted to open her heart to the beauties of nature; and her propensity in this respect led me to a more intimate contemplation of them. (277)

To Godwin, Wollstonecraft exhibits the kind of minute attention, “taste,” and “sensibility” that could reconstitute the way in which people see, feel, and perceive of the natural world and the subjective self within that world. Wollstonecraft translates her own cultural appreciations into her aesthetic discourse, imparting her own “taste for the picturesque” yet situating within that domain edifying measures for the reader (*Memoirs*, 272). Wollstonecraft cogently delivers a revised rendition of the picturesque aesthetic to foreground realistic images of pressures and persuasions that unequivocally determine the exterior and interior progress of mankind.
NOTES

Chapter One

1 Early traces of the word appear in English in 1685 with William Aglionby’s discussion on free, bold painting or what “the Italians call working A la pittoresk” (Aglionby 24, qtd. in Hipple 185). The term slowly trickles into English, appearing in Steele’s 1705 *The Tender Husband* and in footnotes to Pope’s 1715-1720 translation of the *Iliad* (Hipple, 185, 354). See Walter Hipple’s *The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory* (1957), pages 185-86 and 354-55, for a comprehensive list of the various spellings, denotations, and other primary sources that use the term “picturesque.”

2 Throughout the century, the shift in painting and poetry from representing classical pastoral scenes and continental terrains to representing British landscapes also encouraged a taste and nostalgia for the homeland and, thus, prompted the domestic search for the picturesque (Andrews 23).

3 To Gilpin, complete smoothness as seen in Palladian architecture is too “formal” to be picturesque. Leveled grounds, organized clumps, belts, and serpentine rivers as designed by William Kent and Capability Brown display of vain affectation, which merely “offends the picture” according to Gilpin (8).

4 Perhaps these imaginative reconstructions, as Malcolm Andrews notes, derive in part from the mid to late eighteenth-century indulgence in “pleasing melancholy” and “agreeable horror” evoked particularly in graveyard poetry and writings on sublime landscapes (41). Picturesque images of moldering decay and “broken and irregular
forms” likely piqued moments of pleasurable affliction, a popular sentiment sought at the time (Andrews 45).

5 The aesthetic could be seen as further problematic in the realm of sexual politics. Vivien Jones observes that Gilpin, Price, and Knight participate in a sexual ideology which allows a “debauched, aristocratic masculinity” that yet degrades femininity (Jones 127). According to Jones, these theorists wield a voyeuristic gaze upon a “tantalizing” aesthetic object, which increasingly had been femininized, enclosed, and domesticated for “private ownership” and “private consumption” (127, 121). Jones notes Knight’s statement in “The Landscape”: “Let my unhallow’d steps your seats invade,/ And penetrate your undiscov’re’d shade” (11-12). Price too describes the picturesque as “the coquetry of nature,” a quality which “makes beauty more amusing, more varied, more playful” (Essay, 86). Likewise, Gilpin writes of the aesthetic, “We pursue her from hill to dale; and hunt after those various beauties, with which she every where abounds” and further finds the “pleasures of the chase . . . universal” (47-48). While one can identify marginalizing politics within the picturesque, I find that the aesthetic still allowed space for an author to debunk such powers and, as Wollstonecraft herself shows, re-appropriate certain terms for good measure.

6 Jones also observes that writers like Charlotte Smith, Syndey Morgan, and Jane Austen incorporate the picturesque tropes so as to subvert and deflate libertine aestheticism and objectification of femininity (120-121). Smith’s The Old Manor House (1794), Morgan’s The Wild Irish Girl (1806), and Austen’s Mansfield Park appropriate picturesque features like the country house and moments of rustic tranquility yet noticeably incorporate a voice of female subjectivity representative of rational thought.
and self-possession (Jones 120-139). Such movements “ruthlessly minimized” any profligate notions intimated by cultural theorists, comments Jones (121, 139).

7 Wollstonecraft reviewed Gilpin’s *Observations on the River Wye, and several Parts of South Wales, etc, relative chiefly to picturesque Beauty, made in the summer of the Year 1770.* (1789), *Observations, relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty, made in the Year 1776, on several Parts of Great Britain, particularly the Highlands of Scotland* (1789), *Remarks on Forest Scenery, and other Woodland Views* (1791), and *Three Essays* (1792) shortly after each work was published.

8 See Wollstonecraft’s 1790 review of Gilpin’s *Observations, relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* (7.197). The second quotation comes from Wollstonecraft’s 1792 review of Archbald Robertson’s 1792 *A Topographical Survey of the Great Road from London to Bath and Bristol . . . illustrated by perspective Views of the most select and picturesque Scenery* (7.432).

9 See Wollstonecraft’s 1792 Review of Francis Garden’s *Travelling Memorandum, made in a Tour upon the Continent of Europe, in the Years 1786, 87, and 88* (1791).

Chapter Two

Mason’s “tranquility” evidences aspects of Miltonic style, namely the use of paradox to concentrate on the essence of a moment or characterization. Specifically, this passage recalls Milton’s companion poems “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso,” which mediate the pleasures and consequences of “mirth” and “melancholy” from, as Georgia Christopher notes, the voice of one subjective narrator (23). These poems illustrate how
interplay between adjacent, contradictory forces can render profound cohesion and substance in the presentation of a whole subject. Here Mason’s warmth and cheer appears; yet her joy ironically is accompanied by accumulated grief and hardship. One dynamic gives way to the other in a companionate almost cyclic fashion, while the combined presence of mirth and melancholy places Mason’s interiority in conspicuous relief.

2 Noting her odd blend of religious piety and discipline, Todd considers her a “powerful mentor” who “deputizes for God in her pupils’ lives” while Barbara Johnson finds her to be “a pious woman of formidable self-assurance and severe . . . pedagogic style” (Todd 127, 467; Feminist Imagination 34). Other critics are more forgiving and even approving of Mason’s austere methods. She is a “heroine of successful and hardy authority,” “a benevolent despot,” and a “tyrant of authoritarian sensibility” who defends “female sense,” comments Catherine Parke (108). Despite her seeming “terrorist tactics,” Mason is “unequivocally . . . a spokesperson for the ethic of feeling and a woman of feeling herself” (Conger 77).

Chapter Three

1 With the Grand Tour and domestic tours increasing in popularity, the exclusive nucleus of travelers from aristocratic gentlemen, diplomats, and colonizers shifted to include women, children, and the less privileged (Buzard 37; Franklin 155).

2 Imlay had been evading a British embargo at the time, illegally running trade to France through neutral Scandinavia when his silver and ship went missing. Wollstonecraft was granted power of attorney to negotiate settlement in a lawsuit over
this lost property (Bohls 276; Franklin 149-52). Imlay hoped too the journey would relieve Wollstonecraft’s melancholy as she previously had attempted suicide via a laudanum overdose in response to his repeated infidelity (Bohls 276, Franklin 147).

3 Similarly throughout her private letters she uses the phrase “entre nous,” between us, indicating that her personal experience is a shared experience that correlates and corresponds to others.

4 Wollstonecraft reiterates this notion of being imprisoned—or “bastilled”—for life due to circumstantial arrangements in her unfinished novel *The Wrongs of Woman; Or, Maria*. Reflecting on her conjugal ties to Mr. Venables, Maria utters, “Marriage had bastilled me for life. I discovered a capacity for the enjoyment of the various pleasures existence affords; yet, fettered by the partial laws of society, this fair globe was to me an universal blank” (1.146). Wollstonecraft moves from the gravity of being born into oppressed constrictions to the agonizing pain of knowing that something better exists in life yet being unable to actualize those desires. Maria had known previously natural bounty and enjoyed concourse through picturesque scenarios and corollary intellectual stimulation. Bound by the dictates of her husband, however, she is unable to fulfill those needs and desires and suffers while abiding his and society’s law.
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<http://www.ualberta.ca/%7Edmiall/Travel/Picturesque.htm#Gilpin2>.


