

Introduction

Reluctant Wanderers

In the last days of the Scandinavian journey that would become the basis of her great post-Revolutionary travel book, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote, “I am weary of travelling – yet seem to have no home – no resting place to look to. – I am strangely cast off.” This sentiment reverberates through her writings, as she repeatedly casts herself as a solitary wanderer.¹ Wollstonecraft is not alone in depicting movement as troubling. “Forlorn,” “unhappy,” “helpless,” “harassed,” and even “terrified” women wanderers populate British writing of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially women’s writing. These are not travelers as we know them, adventuring out to explore the world, but unwilling pained figures, moving not because they choose to but because they have no choice. One of Ann Radcliffe’s orphan heroines shudders at the mere possibility of becoming “a wanderer in the wide world; without friends to protect, or money to support her; the prospect was gloomy – was terrible!”² This book examines what these early women wanderers can show us about the terrors of leaving home. At the same time it explores what is exciting and expansive about such journeys beyond the familiar.

To be a wanderer is not quite the same as being a traveler: wandering assumes neither destination nor homecoming. The wanderer’s narrative tends to work by digression and detour rather than by a direct route. Wanderers, and their narratives, are always in danger of becoming lost. A wanderer is also someone who moves from place to place encountering a series of different people, making her a natural vehicle for literary explorations of sympathy and sociability, social exclusion and loneliness.

The wanderer became a valuable metaphorical figure in the eighteenth century as writers encountered the implications of a more mobile and urbanized society, in which journeys beyond the domestic home or the town where one was born were becoming increasingly common. From the picaresque hero to the sentimental traveler or “man of feeling,” to the iconic

2 Women Wanderers and the Writing of Mobility, 1784–1814

traveler of Romantic writing, the male wanderer is a recurrent and familiar figure in texts of this period, while his journey is written into the DNA of the novelistic *Bildungsroman*. This book alters the familiar critical picture of an explosion in interest in wanderers in the late eighteenth century by finding an unexpected concentration of wanderers in women's texts. It also finds that women wanderers tend to bear the worst consequences of wandering. I focus on works by four key women authors, Charlotte Smith, Ann Radcliffe, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Frances Burney. Here we find the haunting opposites of the pleasant meanderings of Henry Fielding's Tom Jones or Samuel Johnson's Rasselas, the leisurely travels of Laurence Sterne's Yorick, or even the burdened, but ultimately consoling, movements of William Wordsworth's traveler-poets. The female wanderers I look at typically inhabit more marginal social positions than their predominantly male predecessors or Romantic descendants – my authors are interested in a kind of deep homelessness, both physical and emotional. The structure of excursion and return that gives more familiar traditions of wandering a frame of security is distinctively lacking here: these pained wanderers are indigent, unpatronized poets dependent on the market; wives separated from abusive husbands; orphans whose guardians prey upon rather than protect them; unmarried mothers; unhoused widows; and émigrés in flight. Typically they lack a home, and in some cases never had one. Nor is the dignifying or glorifying romance model of the quest available to them. In these writings, travel is not what sociologist Georg Simmel described as an "adventure," a kind of "island in life," but the landscape of life itself.³ An examination of these vulnerable wanderers makes movement in what is often seen as the first "great age of travel" look rather more frightening than has previously been understood. It also subtly shifts understandings of the history of both sympathy and mobility.

If this book is about travelers, poetic speakers, and characters in novels who wander not because they choose to but because they have no choice, it is also about texts that wander as much as their human subjects: it is about sonnet sequences that seem unable to stop; novels that digress endlessly from plot, stray from prose into verse, or quote other texts obsessively; and travel narratives that seem incapable of reaching a homecoming. Wandering can be productively understood as a formal trait of these texts as much as an activity that takes place within them. By reluctant wandering, evoked in the title phrase of this introduction, I mean literal movement that resists its own forward progression – and texts which seem to represent that resistance formally. My most ambitious objective in this book is to find ways of understanding wanderings (digressions) in writing we are only just learning

Introduction

3

to reread, and to ask what can be said about the formal aesthetics of texts that cannot or do not choose to chart a clear path forward. Throughout, I foreground the symbiotic relationship between wandering protagonists who cannot direct their routes and the formally wandering texts that they inhabit.

In approaching the question of how the aesthetics of texts of this period might be linked to their recurrent narratives of homelessness, I examine manifestations of literal and textual wandering within different genres. I start with the long poem, a poetic form especially useful for charting shifts in metaphorical depictions of the human figure in the landscape because of its focus on landscape descriptions and its accompanying meandering structure. Here I discuss a number of texts, written by both women and men, in particular, the long poems of James Thomson, Oliver Goldsmith, William Cowper, and Charlotte Smith. I then examine figurations of women's wandering in Smith's evolving sonnet sequence, *Elegiac Sonnets, and Other Poems* (1784–1800); Radcliffe's most digressive gothic novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794); Wollstonecraft's only travel narrative, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796); and in Burney's last sentimental novel, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (1814). I close the historical frame by means of an analysis, focused on Wordsworth, of what the tradition of the Romantic wanderer learns, and what it suppresses, from this female tradition. *Women Wanderers and the Writing of Mobility* identifies and explicates a cross-genre mode of writing and in doing so makes an argument for the formal distinctiveness of the literature of the late eighteenth century in general, literature that is still too often treated as merely transitional, or subsumed into pre-Romanticism. A significant body of new interdisciplinary thinking about mobility has for some time been reshaping scholarship across a number of fields. In exploring the story of an overlooked literary tradition of writing about movement, I aim to further expand the ways in which we are able to think through the relationships between travel, mobility, gender, social interaction, and literary form.

Wandering Sympathies

What roles do women wanderers play in more familiar traditions of wandering? To demarcate what the tradition of the reluctant woman wanderer involves, it will be helpful first to distinguish it from other traditions of writing about movement. While my focus is largely on women's wanderings in female-authored texts, to open up the landscape

4 Women Wanderers and the Writing of Mobility, 1784–1814

more generally I want to set this within a wider literary and cultural conversation drawing on both male- and female-authored writings.

To start with, figurations of the reluctant woman wanderer are distinct both from the male wanderers central to the eighteenth-century tradition of the sentimental journey and from the more easily passed over women bit players in this predominantly masculine tradition of writing about travel. In the quintessential male-authored texts of sentimental literature, gender serves a strategic structural function in demarcating and separating out the different aspects of the experience of mobility. Following on from the Grand Tour and associations of Enlightenment travel, opportunities for adventure and sympathy are predominantly linked to male travelers in works by Samuel Johnson, Laurence Sterne, and Henry MacKenzie. In tandem, the most dire effects of exposure and the potential to become lost – the disquieting resonances of movement more associated with wandering than travel – tend to be projected onto female figures. This is already a complication of the archetypal Odysseus and Penelope narrative. There the male traveler's journey is enabled by a woman who stays stationary – functioning both as a metonym of home and as a point of origin to be left and returned to – and who becomes linked to the nineteenth-century trope of the domestic woman as angel of the house.⁴ In their sentimental and Romantic formations, frequently mobile female figures enable the male traveler's journey by absorbing, and voicing, the more troubling aspects of mobility itself.

In *Rasselas* (1759) it is Johnson's woman wanderer, not his traveler prince, whom he uses to register the shock of the move from the security of the domestic, or the stationary hilltop view, to the potential vulnerability of the nomadic. When the little troop ventures out of the Happy Valley – Johnson's dystopic Eden – to begin their wanderings about the world, the prince, Rasselas, anticipates “all the pleasures of travel.” By contrast,

The princess and her maid turned their eyes towards every part, and, seeing nothing to bound their prospect, considered themselves as in danger of being lost in a dreary vacuity. They stopped and trembled. ‘I am almost afraid, said the princess, to begin a journey of which I cannot perceive an end, and to venture into this immense plain where I may be approached on every side by men whom I never saw.’ The prince felt nearly the same emotions, though he thought it more manly to conceal them.⁵

What is revealing about this particular familial tableau of the emotional division of labor is that Johnson suggests, somewhat humorously, that

Introduction

5

Rasselas experiences “nearly” the same feelings as his sister despite his seeming excitement. The distinction, Johnson implies, is one of expression. While both travelers feel “unmanly” anxiety about beginning a journey, it is, by implication, Nekayah’s “womanly” task to voice fear of the unknown – like Milton’s Eve, to lament the move to “wander down / Into a lower World, to this obscure / And wilde . . .”⁶ In a reversal of conventional discourses of aesthetics, it is women travelers who are made to anticipate the sublime terrors which face a wanderer in the world outside the home – the sense of exposure, lack of direction, and perhaps most importantly, loneliness and fear in a wide world inhabited by strangers. It is as though the more troubling aspects of the journey are so threatening that a female voice becomes necessary as a vehicle for both expressing and dismissing these threats. The distinction made by Johnson is a contained version of the poetic examples I discuss in Chapter 1, where “the Man of philosophic Eye,” to use James Thomson and William Cowper’s terms, is carefully, and often anxiously, demarcated along class and gender lines from those exposed to the “horrid Prospect” and “formless Wild” where “comprehension wanders lost” (*A*, 1133, *W*, 281–83, *Task*, 4.75). Mobility, Johnson and others imply, if looked at – or spoken – directly, would endanger manliness itself.

Mobility might also endanger one’s sanity, as Sterne suggests by means of the figure of Maria of Moulines in his hugely popular fictionalized travel narrative, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768). In perhaps the most iconic tableau in sentimental literature, Sterne’s satirical hero, Yorick, meets Maria “wandering somewhere about the road.” While he has only been traveling for a matter of weeks, she tells him she has already

stray’d as far as Rome, and walk’d round St Peter’s once – and return’d back – that she found her way alone across the Apennines – had travell’d over all Lombardy without money – and through the flinty roads of Savoy without shoes.⁷

Sterne links the different journeys Maria has taken with dashes in a way that accentuates their stuttering, random, and directionless quality, as though she can no more narrate her wanderings than she can understand them. “Poor Maria” as “disorder’d maid” embodies a nightmare version of that state Nekayah fears in such an unmanly way: Maria has become lost, both literally and psychologically, on a journey without end. Yorick’s pity for this fellow wanderer is precisely what insulates him from the vulnerability that identification with her, and with the aspects of wandering she represents, might bring. Yorick, and so Sterne, depicts Maria’s vast travels

6 Women Wanderers and the Writing of Mobility, 1784–1814

as “weaknesses and wanderings,” implicitly constructing the equivocal masculinity of the sentimental traveler – and the onward movement of his journey – on the foundation of the extremity of her vulnerability and lack of direction. When Yorick jauntily “journieth on his way” at the end of their tear-fueled encounter, he leaves Maria literally standing in the public marketplace, as much on the road as ever, and more dangerously so than he ever will be.⁸

Three decades later, as part of what Susan Wolfson calls Romanticism’s “fascination of male poetics with female formations,”⁹ William Wordsworth also turns repeatedly to depictions of women wanderers, from the beggar in *An Evening Walk* (1793), to the vagrants of the Salisbury Plains poems and *Lyrical Ballads* (1798 and 1800), to distressed Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage* (1798) and Book I of *The Excursion* (1814). I will return to this with particular reference to the work of David Simpson later in this introduction, and in more detail in the coda at the end of the book. Wordsworth’s women wanderers also tend to bear the worst consequences of wandering; indeed, these consequences are frequently fatal. At the same time, as in sentimental literature their stories are often bracketed by being told to an interlocutor of some sort, frequently another traveler who meets her on the road. This bracketing traveler and narrator is again usually male and in his most iconic form can “afford to suffer / with those whom he saw suffer,” implying both emotional and economic resources the women wanderers in these encounters lack.¹⁰

Without overemphasizing the continuity between Sterne and Wordsworth, in whose work such encounters become radically more troubling, the persistent recurrence of this figure of the woman wanderer across decades and across literary forms suggests its general usefulness and centrality to efforts in this period to think through, and at times to diffuse, the unsettling implications of a more mobile society. As exemplified in the Sterne example, these female figures of abjection and loss are often sighted, engaged with, and moved on from – being left with startling frequency to madness or death. Yet the recurrent presence of these women wanderers within male wanderers’ stories suggests that in this period they in some sense work as the emblematic means of constructing the male wanderer’s condition. One of the questions I pose is whether wandering men in this age are themselves always potentially in a female subject position, or whether female wanderings are categorically different from male wanderings in texts of this period. Either way, the condition signified by female wandering itself is never fully addressed in these male-authored texts; it is always (even if only obliquely) contained within a wider narrative, rather than being the subject of narrative itself. The women

Introduction

7

wanderers who appear in these sentimental texts, and who reappear as the countless female beggars, gypsies, and grieving widows of Romanticism, are suggestive of the deep homelessness explored by the women authors whose work is examined in this book, but they fail to fully represent it. Smith, Radcliffe, Wollstonecraft, and Burney are certainly working in conversation with these traditions, but they take on the riskier project of making the vulnerable figure of the woman wanderer their start and end point, in the process taking up all the potential for psychological and narrative crisis this move suggests. In a very real sense, the women poetic speakers, travelers, and characters depicted at the center of these female-authored texts cannot afford to suffer with those they see suffer, feeling persistently threatened by the task of encountering the wide world from a socially and economically unstable position.

The divergent imagining of the journey brought forward in these female-authored texts has especially important implications for our understandings of sympathy in the period in which it was theorized. Sympathy, broadly conceived as the “social passion” of “fellow-feeling,” to use Adam Smith’s terms, played a key role in imaginings of sociability and civil society in the eighteenth century (*TMS*, 47). In Smith’s theorization of imaginative sympathy in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759–1790), which first appeared just under a decade before Sterne’s sentimental journey (and which I will turn to in more detail shortly), the figure of the “spectator” is central. This figure is imagined engaged in the act of watching others suffer and working to participate in what other people feel. As James Chandler draws out in *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (2013), what Sterne and the subgenre of writing about travel he influenced did with Smith’s theorization was to make the journey through the world the central metaphor or “vehicle” for imaginings of sympathy. Sentimental travel literalized the series of encounters involved in engaging imaginatively with others, figuring this through actual movement through the world and as actual encounters with people. In the activities of the traveling spectator of the sentimental journey, writers fused physical mobility with virtual or emotional movement into other people’s points of view, making the spectator a figure in motion, defined by his “capacity to move and be moved.”¹¹ As I show in my first chapter, this shift can also be seen pictorially through the shift in landscape aesthetics that occurred over the century, from a privileging of the centralized, generalizing, raised prospect viewer to the emergence of the earthbound and open wanderer as a key figure for imagining social relations.

8 Women Wanderers and the Writing of Mobility, 1784–1814

As a number of scholars have shown, sympathy in sentimental literature involved not just a “feeling for” others but often a “feeling down,” or as Adam Smith puts it, a kind of “candid condescension and indulgent humanity” by the privileged classes (*TMS*, 29). Performances of sympathy require objects of sympathy, who in the literature of sensibility and of sentimental travel take a number of forms, from suffering women of various kinds, to slaves, to wounded soldiers and the rural poor displaced by enclosure. As Julie Ellison notes, the central texts of sensibility and sentimentality are not unaware of the potential embarrassments of these exchanges.¹² Nonetheless, scenes of sympathy in these texts, whether built on literal encounters or purely imagined ones, typically work by means of a hierarchical emotional exchange that posits an upper-middle-class man, or less often woman, as the idealized subject of sympathy, to be observed and admired in a transitory moment of feeling for someone else. The peculiar pleasures associated with such moments are exemplified by the “undescribable emotions” Sterne’s Yorick feels as a result of weeping with Maria, which make him feel no less than “positive [he has] a soul.”¹³ In such moments, the ability to sympathize becomes a virtue in itself, “both a character trait and an intellectual performance enacted before an audience of friends and acquaintances” —and readers.¹⁴

In a shift from earlier critical understandings of sentimentality and sensibility, which saw them predominantly as enabling female expression, much has now been written about the heterosocial nature of what G. J. Barker-Benfield first dubbed the “cult of sensibility.”¹⁵ Claudia L. Johnson and others have argued that the sentimental “men of feeling” from Sterne through Edmund Burke frequently reduce women to being the objects of male tears by themselves occupying formerly feminine gender traits, while Ellison has delineated a longer political history of the predominance of “male tender-heartedness.”¹⁶ Wollstonecraft’s own critique of sensibility in her two *Vindications* has played a vital role in this reassessment, as has her travel writing in the more recent critical shift, discussed in Chapter 4, that favors the view that women writers nonetheless managed to co-opt the language of sensibility and sentimental travel for their own ends.

If Sterne’s sentimental traveler and Henry MacKenzie’s “man of feeling” are emblematic of a way of imagining and exploring sympathy through a series of hierarchical encounters, then a divergent tradition of writing about movement must also involve a recalibration of conceptions of sympathy. Revealing things happen when a female political philosopher (Wollstonecraft’s traveler in *A Short Residence*) or a highly educated female

Introduction

9

emigrant (Burney's Juliet), or even a gothic heroine (Radcliffe's Emily), takes the place of a mad Maria or a doomed female vagrant on the road. The bare fact of their refusal to (quite) go mad or die, and in the process to enable or make safe someone else's somewhat less troubled movements, makes new narratives of wandering and the individual mind necessary. Rather than splitting the wanderer figure in two – into its “male” and “female” attributes – these texts work to develop a figure that combines a Yorick and a Maria (spectator and sufferer, subject and object), concentrating vision and abjection in a single figure. The distress of women as depicted in sentimental literature is real, these women's revisions of the sentimental journey suggest, but we need to think harder about the social, political, and economic causes of those distresses – and about their wide-ranging effects.

Evocations of women's wanderings at the center of texts by authors such as Charlotte Smith, Wollstonecraft, and Burney, I argue, while by no means completely displacing the hierarchies at work in much sentimental literature and in much Romantic writing, nonetheless complicate the power relations implicit in traditions in which the suffering female is frequently figured as an object of a male protagonist's, and so a reader's, pity and concern. Once sympathy is no longer rendered safe by being understood as an interaction based on social inequality – of which gender is one of the clearest markers – it becomes exponentially more difficult to regulate and manage. As I discuss, Wollstonecraft has sympathy rise “to anguish” for her homeless traveler in *A Short Residence*; while “horror” at what someone else has done “occup[ies]” the mind of Radcliffe's gothic heroine.¹⁷ The moment in Wollstonecraft amounts to a kind of emotional invasion of a too present awareness of the suffering of multiple others, that in Radcliffe to an eerie, haunting level of emotional vulnerability. Burney shows her homeless protagonist, Juliet, reduced to the condition of a kind of human automaton as a result of the unrelenting demands of others on her time, her labor, and her feelings. In presenting the female figures at the center of their texts as fitting awkwardly into the categories of either subject or object of feeling these writers challenge the structure on which sentimental literature is based.

More widely, the movements of women wanderers at the center of these works unsettle models such as Adam Smith's of a society bound by sympathy. In imagining the primary exchange of sympathy through the figure of the “impartial spectator,” Smith is working within the tradition of a theory of moral judgment also found in the work of fellow Scottish

10 Women Wanderers and the Writing of Mobility, 1784–1814

philosophers Francis Hutcheson and David Hume. In Smith, this spectator is conceived of as taking on, and in the process judging, the feelings of others by means of explicit acts of the imagination. Smith writes, here as is often the case signaling his posited spectator through the universal first person plural, “we can form no idea of the manner in which they [the party concerned] are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation.” This involves an act of the imagination by which “we place ourselves in his situation” and only once his feelings have been “brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own” do they “begin at last to affect us” (*TMS*, II–2). In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Burke uses a similar formulation of emotional movement to Smith’s “imaginary change of situation” when he describes sympathy “as a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected” (*TMS*, 26).¹⁸ What Smith particularly stresses is the act of “bringing home” others’ feelings to ourselves and testing them against what we would feel in the same situation.

However, as D.D. Raphael has emphasized, such acts of imagination explicitly do not always lead to sympathy in Smith’s account, and Smith makes sympathy (and the withholding of it) an essential component of his theory of judgment and social relations. As Raphael summarizes of the position of the spectator in Smith:

If his own imagined feeling is the same as the actual feeling of the agent, he is ‘sympathizing’ with the agent, and his awareness of the sympathy (fellow-feeling) is given expression in approval, declaring that the action is appropriate (right). If, on the other hand, his own imagined feeling differs from that of the agent, he lacks sympathy with the agent, and his awareness of this is given expression in disapproval, declaring that the action is inappropriate (wrong).¹⁹

Adam Smith proposes that the feeling of a suffering agent must be able to accord with that of the spectator; otherwise, “when, upon bringing the case home to himself, he finds that they do not coincide with what he feels, they necessarily appear to him unjust and improper, and unsuitable to the causes which excite them” (*TMS*, 20). To work as a system of moral judgment, such a model is dependent on accepting a general idea of humanity, and a generalizable “disinterested” or “impartial” spectator who can act as a kind of template against which to judge, to use Smith’s terms, the “suitableness or unsuitableness,” the “propriety or impropriety,”