“STILL THE POET CONSECRATES THE STREAM”: ELEGIAC SONNETS, PETRARCH, AND ENGLISH LANDSCAPE

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in English

By

Keith Hasperg, B.A.

Washington, DC
August 26, 2011
“STILL THE POET CONSECRATES THE STREAM”: ELEGiac SONNETS, PETRARCH, AND ENGLISH LANDSCAPE

Keith S. Hasperg, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Duncan Wu, D.Phil.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the influence of Petrarch’s Canzoniere on Charlotte Smith during her writing of the first and third editions of the Elegiac Sonnets from 1784–86. First, I discuss how Petrarch serves as a model of sensibility for Smith in various ways, as she recasts the unrequited, melancholic lover as the relentlessly mournful victim of society. Then, I explain how she Anglicizes the Petrarchan love sonnet by relocating the scenes of memory and despair from Vaucluse into the South Downs landscape. I trace an evolution in Smith’s ideas about nature and its relation to the past, and I connect this with the changes that occurred in her life in this two-year period of her early poetic career. I differentiate between her association of the South Downs with early childhood memories in the first edition, and her fascination in the third edition with the local literary history of the Arun River region. Throughout, I argue that her changing conceptions of the English landscape refer back to Petrarch’s conceptions of the land and its relation to his inamorata, Laura. Two of Petrarch’s sonnets that Smith translates belong to a series he wrote in Valchiusa after the death of Laura, and herein the Italian poet imagines the natural landscape as being haunted by his own emotional past, his grief over Laura, rather than by the spirit of the woman herself. It is this Petrarchan idea of the land wherein nature offers a look into the past, inner world of the poet that Smith
gravitates towards in her early sonnets to the South Downs. She would later move onto a new, consoling vision of the land as a way of accessing in the present the spirits of her poetic kindred spirits. Rather than examining her influence on Romantic poetry or her role in the sonnet revival, I consider Smith as a person responding to and reinventing a poetic form that spoke to her as a woman mournful and vulnerable, and as a lover of the local landscapes and histories in which she immersed herself.
For Jessica Catherine Beckman
As a person of sensibility, I should like to thank most heartily my friends. Over the past year, some very melancholy moments have been beguiled by the companionship of Maeg Keane, Shelby Sleevi, Jonathan Sondej, and James Williford.

Special gratitude goes to my parents, Keith and Sharon Hasperg, who suffered through the physical and emotional misfortunes of 2008–09 with me.

I am very glad to have studied under and learned from two great Wordsworthians, Paul Betz and Kenneth Johnston. I also gained invaluable insights about the writing process from Richard Sha of American University.

Finally, one of the great honors of my life was having the opportunity to learn from Duncan Wu, the most humane academic I have ever known. It was a life-changing experience. Thank you for being the professor who had more faith in me than anyone else ever has. I admire you as a person first.

Many thanks to all,

KEITH S. HASPERG
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**Introduction** .............................................................................................................................. 1

**Chapter One**

Rewriting Petrarch .......................................................................................................................... 9

**Chapter Two**

Memory and Literary History in the South Downs Landscape ................................................. 28

“Ever sacred to the sons of song”: The Sonnets to the Arun River ........................................ 40

**Works Cited** ................................................................................................................................... 65
INTRODUCTION

In July 1784, Charlotte Smith returned to her native grounds of Sussex after having lived out what must have been one of the most distressing periods of her life. Her husband Benjamin had been sent to King’s Bench Prison in London the previous December, and she had been dividing her time between staying with him and visiting her children in West Sussex while coordinating his legal release (Curran xxii). In the initial moments of her homecoming, the memories that the sight of her childhood idyll inspired had a powerful effect on her. The Bignor Park estate to which Smith returned lies in the peaceful South Downs countryside, a region in southeast England unique for its gently undulating terrain, ancient forests, and river valleys. In a letter to a friend, she described her return as a brief moment of contentment, in which she felt at last free from the legal stresses and misery of imprisonment that had dominated the last several months. In this moment of reunion with her family, she seemed to be as full of hope and joy as the child she remembers she once was there.

After such scenes, and such apprehensions, how deliciously soothing to my wearied spirits was the soft pure air of the summer’s morning, breathing over the dewy grass, as (having slept one night on the road) we passed over the heaths of Surrey! My native hills at length burst upon my view – I beheld once more the fields where I had passed my happiest days, and, amidst the perfumed turf with which one of those fields was strewn, perceived, with delight, the beloved groupe, from whom I had
been so long divided, and for whose fate my affections were ever anxious. The transports of this meeting were too much for my exhausted spirits. After all my sufferings I began to hope I might taste content, or experience at least a respite from calamity. (Hays 52)

Perhaps what is most remarkable about these lines to readers familiar with Smith’s work is how closely they echo the sentiments of her sonnets. We find in this letter a woman simultaneously exhausted and exhilarated, a mother and wife trying to escape the hardships of adult life and wishing for refuge in a simpler, more natural one. The energy in the description of hills that “burst upon” her view, the sense of emotional restoration derived from the “deliciously soothing” air, and the precarious position of a woman poised between contentment and apprehensions of past and future sufferings – these all characterize the voices of both Charlotte Smith the person and Charlotte Smith the poet. At this moment in her life, she had published only one month earlier her first major work, under the title *Elegiac Sonnets and Other Essays by Charlotte Smith of Bignor Park, in Sussex*. Despite the sometimes cloying and affected tone adopted in much poetry of sensibility, the letter concisely illustrates just how relevant the sentiments and the attitude of these sonnets were to Smith in her real life. In Sonnet V, one of Smith’s most highly regarded poems, beholding the rolling South Downs hillsides causes her to remember her childhood and wonder about the possibility of finding peace in returning there. In these opening lines, Smith the poet is almost indistinguishable from the real woman writing the letter.
Ah! hills belov’d!—where once a happy child,
Your beechen shades, “your turf, your flowers among,”¹
I wove your blue-bells into garlands wild,
And woke your echoes with my artless song.
Ah! hills belov’d!—your turf, your flowers remain;
But can they peace to this sad breast restore;
For one poor moment soothe the sense of pain,
And teach a breaking heart to throb no more? (1–8)

In these lines, the scenery is both heartening and an upsetting reminder of
departed happiness, and the sonnet captures Smith’s feelings about the Sussex hillsides
during the same period in which she wrote the letter. However, it represents only one
stage of development in Smith’s poetry. In the pages that follow, I examine an
evolution in Smith’s conceptions of her local Sussex landscape revealed in her earliest
sonnets, looking specifically at those written for the first and third editions, published in
1784 and 1786 respectively. I view these sonnets as expressions of how Smith
understood her powerful emotional connection to the South Downs landscape, and I
read them in connection with the dramatic changes in her life that occurred at the time
she was writing them. The sonnets comprising the first edition that I examine were the
product of a period of dramatic flux. Parts of this earliest sonnet sequence were penned
before her time in prison with Benjamin began in December 1783, while she was still in

¹ “Whose turf, whose shades, whose flowers among.” Gray [Thomas Gray, “Ode on a Distant
Prospect of Eton College,” line 8] (Smith’s citation, bracketed portion is Curran’s [15])
the comfort of her Lys Farm home in Hampshire. The rest she wrote during the first five months of 1784, a period during which she was torn between King’s Bench and Bignor Park, where she had left her children in the care of her brother Nicholas during her absence. Throughout the months that followed, her life continued to change quickly, as she relocated with Benjamin and her children to Dieppe in Upper Normandy to escape his creditors, and after only a few months was on the move again to the small village of Woolbeding in West Sussex. It was her residence in Woolbeding and her love of its rich literary heritage that produced a visionary series of poems to the Arun River, which had been home to the Restoration dramatist Thomas Otway and literally ran through Smith’s backyard. This series of sonnets was published in the third edition and describes a consoling vision of the landscape that was as new to the poet as life in Woolbeding was. It was a vision connected to histories outside of her own personal childhood recollections, and a vision tied to a literary past that brought her comfort and helped her develop her poetic identity.

Smith’s sonnets are evidence of an evolving relationship with nature that changed as her surroundings did, and I examine this at the expense of focusing on poetic artifice. This is not to ignore the importance of the various poetic personae that Smith developed, the fact that she considered poetry to be her most serious literary endeavor, or the likelihood that as a skilled poet she carefully considered the reactions of her readers. The similarity between the sentiments we find in the letter and those we find in the poems to the South Downs implies the importance that sonnet writing had to
Smith personally. It illustrates that in the *Elegiac Sonnets* she was writing about nature in a way that expressed as honestly and as directly as possible her feelings about the English landscape.

The similarity between her private and her published expressions about her native turf also says something refreshing about the voice of the *Elegiac Sonnets*. It suggests that, at times, critical arguments about artificial poetic personae in the *Sonnets* can become overblown and fail to appreciate the personal aspect of her early poetry. Discussions about the authenticity of Smith’s poetic voice have become the norm in much of the criticism on her sonnets, and this has resulted in numerous studies of the various voices she constructs. One of the primary stances critics see Smith adopting is that of the object of sympathy, a position that is thought to demand deliberate manipulation of the audience. These arguments grow out of the well-founded observation of self-pity in Smith’s poetry. Stuart Curran, one of Smith’s most influential proponents, notes this aspect of her work but honors the extreme circumstances of her life as well. He maintains that there is sincerity in what appears to be posturing:

> Charlotte Smith made a virtual career out of self-pity. She rises from it in her novels, but it is the obsession of her poetry and, to judge by her letters, of her life. But, in sober fact, she had ample justification. In 1783 she joined a wastrel husband, to whom she had been forcibly married in mid-adolescence, in debtor’s prison, surrounded with a veritable brood
of their children. In effect, from that point on they were her sole
responsibility, and her recourse was to write -- and write. (Curran 189)

Curran’s connection of the relentlessly mournful tone of the *Sonnets* with the
difficult circumstances of her life at the time of its composition posits a degree of
straightforwardness that seems out-of-step with more recent analyses of Smith the poet.
Jacqueline Labbe argues that the difficulties of Smith’s life presented her with
opportunities, serving as marketing tools for the sale of her volumes and as creative
avenues for the critique of cultural gender norms:

She creates a parade of acculturated identities, using her poetry to
question the nature of the gendered self, and by extension revealing
poetry’s suitability to contain and represent Selfhood: the Romantic
notion of individuality, but inflected by a desire to challenge social
constructions of individuality. This is, of course, on the one hand a keen
marketing ploy; speaking with the voice of the mother or the distressed
woman allows Smith to tap into the perennial romantic appeal of such
feminine types. But while Smith would have been well aware of the
exploitation value of such figures, and not at all averse to using them to
make her poetry sellable, I argue that the significance of her style goes
beyond its market potentials. Smith’s work, I contend, demonstrates her
comprehension of the culture of gender. (*Charlotte Smith* 8)

As this passage indicates, Labbe focuses her study of the *Elegiac Sonnets* on
how Smith adopts various voices, especially those of “the good mother” and “the
woman in need” to address cultural assumptions about women. Throughout, she values the great emotional and financial stress under which Smith wrote her poetry. She pays respect to Smith by bearing in mind the practical concerns that accompanied the development of a vital and inventive body of work, celebrating her as “a poet for whom poetry is as much a job of hard physical labour as it is a reflection of powerful feeling, whose life had virtually no tranquility” (*Works* viii). However, Labbe’s fixation on Smith’s constructed voices also epitomizes a trend in criticism of Smith’s poetry that makes it difficult to trace the effects of her life’s changes on her poetry, by devaluing the personal insights that her poems offer. Labbe argues that Smith utilizes multiple voices in order to reveal an “artificiality of sincerity,” in which “the ‘authentic’ becomes a pose, even as the pose is read as authentic” (*Charlotte Smith* 23). By viewing the biographical aspect of Smith’s poetry as a means to performing a cultural critique, and by focusing on it as a platform for peddling a product, analyses such as Labbe’s run the risk of drowning out the dynamic personal voice of the *Sonnets*. When self-revelation is equivalent to cleverness, and when its inherent ability to move the reader is grounds for suspicion that Smith must be up to something, critics inadvertently contest the legitimacy of an artistry expressive of personal suffering and devalue the sentimental voice as an act of critical protocol. With the *Elegiac Sonnets* in particular, interest in separate, constructed poetic voices largely has precluded consideration of what the sonnets might reveal about Smith’s understanding of her own persistent

---

2 See *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry and the Culture of Gender*, chapters 2 and 3 for Labbe’s exploration of these two particular personae.
despair, and her evolving conceptions of the South Downs landscape.

Of all her literary influences, the one with which Smith aligns herself the most in her earliest works is that of Petrarch, the fourteenth-century originator of the sonnet, whose abiding love for Laura is the subject of his Canzoniere. While often credited as the first poet since Milton to re-popularize the sonnet, Smith’s role in revitalizing the form is much greater than is often thought. In the pages that follow, I will explain how she Anglicizes the Petrarchan love sonnet, recasting the unfulfilled lover as the relentlessly mournful victim of society, and relocating the scenes of memory from Vaucluse to the South Downs. In the first chapter, I will be addressing the question of why Petrarch was so important to her personally, and how he served as a model for and kindred of her own fragile sensibility. In the second chapter, I will be examining how her changing conceptions of the English landscape refer back to Petrarch’s conceptions of the land and its relation to Laura. Rather than examining Smith’s influence on Romantic poetry and the sonnet revival, the pages that follow will consider Smith as a person responding to and reinventing a poetic form that spoke to her as a woman mournful and vulnerable, and as a lover of the local landscapes and histories in which she immersed herself.
Chapter One

Rewriting Petrarch

“Non t’ appressar ove sia riso e canto
Canzone mio, no, ma pianto:
Non fa per te di star con gente allegra
Vedova sconsolata, in vesta nigra.”³

First published in 1797, the second volume of the *Elegiac Sonnets* begins with the epigraph above, the final four lines of Petrarch’s Sonnet 268. Here Smith conveys the continuing importance of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* as a forebear of her own sensibility, as well as important themes shared by her and the Italian poet. In these four lines, we find restlessness amidst happiness and renewal, a lorn figure of exceptional darkness, and possibly a hope for consolation in solitude. In her translations of four of Petrarch’s sonnets,⁴ Smith rewrites them to emphasize particular aspects of his passionate, faithful love for Laura most appropriate to her depiction of her own enduring despair. The translations also serve to contextualize her sorrows within a lineage of sorrowful writers by imagining a kinship between her and the originator of the despairing sonnet. Petrarch is an important kindred for Smith. His griefs endure faithfully through the years, and his sorrows reach depths that demand images of physical torture, as well as moments of consolation upon envisaging his beloved that mingle spiritual elation with fearful pensiveness. Smith finds particular parallels between herself and Petrarch, rewriting his

³ “Flee serenity and renewal; approach not, my song, where there be smiles or singing, no, only tears: it will not do for you to remain among happy people, disconsolate widow, clothed in black.” (Curran 1)

⁴ Sonnets XIV, XV, and XVI appeared in the first edition. Sonnet XIII was introduced in the third edition two years later.
sonnets to emphasize the precarious joy in loving the angelic, idealized woman whose charms may or may not be true. She finds in this a moving version of her own precarious childhood joy, which she describes elsewhere in the _Sonnets_ as a kind of magically charmed bliss awaiting destruction. Petrarch’s love for Laura endures the same progression from joy into despair so important to Smith’s reminiscences on her own life. It seems that for Smith, Petrarch epitomizes vulnerability to one’s own sensitive heart, and she elaborates on his love for Laura to paint a more Heavenly, fuller, and less idealizing love that values warm love and melting pity rather than angelic form primarily. With Smith’s Petrarch, there is a hint that the innocence and vulnerability of the child persist into adulthood in a romantic, passionately loving form, and his obsessive love for Laura is softened so that it is able to contextualize her own desire to reclaim her earlier peace. Smith also seems to use these translations as moments in which she can differentiate her own despair from Petrarch’s in important ways and enhance the collection’s sense of futility. Unlike Petrarch who believes he will have eternal union with Laura, Smith never identifies her sorrow with a single source, and she is denied any consolation but oblivion in death.

Analyses of Smith’s use of the sonnet form and its inherent indebtedness to Petrarch make extensive efforts to see her cleverly manipulating the form and identifying with Laura in order to voice the sorrows of victimized and idealized women. This is largely in lieu of attempting to understand more precisely how Petrarch’s faithful, unsatisfied love might serve Smith as a useful analog to her own emotional state after having faced numerous personal losses and hardships. The Petrarchan sonnet
most often describes an unrequited love so passionate that the beloved woman necessarily becomes a radiant, mythic, and almost disembodied figure. Mary Moore claims that by donning the black clothing of the widow in the epigraph Smith assumes the position of Petrarch’s female object throughout the *Elegiac Sonnets*, that Smith “chooses the sonnet sequence form to foreground the sources of suffering that she depicts -- the concept of woman constructed, at least in part, by the erotic desire and objectification that Petrarchism embodies” (Moore 158). Karen Weisman elaborates on the sonnet form’s traditional representations of the female and argues that Smith undermines “a particular kind of mythologizing of woman, one that absolutely cancels her physicality” (Weisman 24) and asserts the authentic, real-life sufferings of the female poet. Perhaps the most helpful aspect of Weisman’s reading is that she astutely recognizes that her claims about Smith’s subversion of the sonnet tradition are influenced by a critical temptation “to insist upon the boldness of her appropriations and to argue that reinventing a tradition that conventionally abstracts women is a gutsy and triumphant assertion of a will to live and a will to representation” (25). Ultimately, and if I read her correctly, perhaps most importantly, Weisman still finds that “whatever the real triumphs of Smith’s daring, a pervasive pathos lurks at the heart of her formal experimentation” (25). In moments such as this, critics recognize, with varying degrees of dedication to doing so, that Smith’s use of the sonnet form contributes to developing the unique pathos of the *Elegiac Sonnets*, although the importance of Petrarch as a parallel to Smith’s sensibility is little explored. Esther Schor notes that “Smith’s sonnet cycle, taken together with its prefaces (which are all cumulatively included), narrates an
increasingly pessimistic tale of her own rhetorical failure to evoke pathos” (Schor 63–64). These critics, whatever their interpretations, imply the importance of the sonnet form to Smith’s relating the particular issues that harrowed her. By shifting the focus away from the implications of the sonnet form and onto Smith’s interpretations and rewritings of Petrarch’s sonnets, we see that Smith calls upon past writers not primarily to subvert them, but rather to explore the similarities between herself and her predecessors whose sensibilities match her own.

In Sonnet XIII, Smith translates Sonnet 145, in which Petrarch explains the inextinguishable faithfulness of his love for Laura despite the forces of nature and fate. Just as important to the poem as faithfulness is the idea that his unsatisfied love is his single source of pain and what defines who he is, has been, and always will be. In the first eleven lines, Petrarch declares the extensive suffering his love could endure:

```
Ponmi ove ‘l sole occide i fiori et l’erba
O dove vince lui il ghiaccio et la neve...
Ponmi in cielo od in terra od in abisso
```

Put me where sun can kill the grass and flowers,
Or where the ice and snow can conquer him...
Put me in Heaven or earth or in abyss (1–2, 9; Musa 237).

These first eleven lines would seem to build up to a statement about the persistent burning of his love, but instead Petrarch follows his defiance of nature and fate by stating in the final two lines that despite any tests, he will remain who he is:

```
saro qual fui, vivro com’ io son visso,
continuando il mio sospir trilustre.
```

I’ll be what I have been, live as I’ve lived
Continuing to sigh trilustrally (12–14; Musa 237).
The poem tacitly concludes that his very identity is defined by his love for Laura. Smith alters Petrarch’s definition of himself by the single passion and source of suffering by substituting it with the persistence of the flame of passionate love and the faithful heart. Smith concludes her translation:

Whate’er my destiny may be,  
That faithful heart still burns for thee! (13–14)

Smith’s version lacks some of the force that Petrarch achieves by declaring the persistence of his life defined by his love rather than the persistence of his love itself -- the force that he achieves by defining, through Laura, what it is to be. Smith’s alteration of the sorrowful person who defines himself by a single source of pain and inspiration is to replace this identification with a more expected and straightforward declaration: “My heart, O Laura, still is thine” (12). It seems that the association of despair with a single cause demanded some rewriting for a woman who details numerous causes of her own suffering, from withering in prison with her debt-ridden husband Benjamin Smith to having to provide solely for her eight surviving children. Luca Manini observes that both the “faithful heart” and the image of burning are nowhere to be found in Petrarch’s original (Manini 99), and it is possible that Smith’s addition of these reveal the qualities of Petrarch’s despair that attract her to it. It is not his sole devotion to his beloved; rather it is the intensity and relentlessness of his lament. Smith drops the continuous sigh, “continuando il mio sospir” (“continuing my sighs”; 14; Musa 237), and when she introduces the more powerful burning heart, she emphasizes the intense pain that tests his fortitude rather than only his loyalty. The heart that burns in Smith’s poetry
symbolizes not only pain, but also the endurance it requires to withstand that burning. She asks the “dews of Heaven” to relieve her “burning breast” and to bathe her “ever-streaming eyes” (Sonnet LXVIII, 1). Here the “cool drops” soothe a burning that never breaks. In Sonnet XXXV “To fortitude,” she creates an alternative metaphor for pain, that of melting, which represents weakness and defeat:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Strengthen’d by thee, this heart shall cease to melt} \\
\text{O’er the ills that poor humanity must bear. (9–10)}
\end{align*}
\]

In Smith’s sonnets, to burn is to persist, and of all her apostrophes in the collection, only fortitude does not ultimately fail her. The twist in the final couplet of Petrarch’s sonnet – his existing for Laura, his identification of his life with a single cause – which is the original’s dramatic culmination, becomes in Smith’s translation a statement that highlights the relentless continuity of the poet’s pain.

Smith also changes the particular forces that the poet’s love will endure. While retaining the desiccating noontime sun, frigid storms, and trials of youth and old age, she rephrases Petrarch’s “in umil fortuna od in superba” (“in lowly fortune or in high”; 5; Musa 237) as “the steps of Fame, / Or Poverty’s more tranquil roads” (5–6). Smith’s version seems to refer more specifically to the hardships of her own life, from being in debtor’s prison with Benjamin to establishing herself as a popular poet. Similarly, she rewrites “libero spirto of a’ suoi membri affisso” (“a spirit free or one fixed to its body”; 11; Musa 237) as “prisoner or free -- obscure or unknown” (11), having the sonnet seem to refer more directly to her past experiences. Her addition of these details is typical of how she uses the figure of Petrarch, the sonnet form, and literary expressions of sorrow
generally: She is willing to utilize the form and the sentiments of her forebears to express her own rather different experiences.

“That faithful heart still burns for thee” (14), a sentiment original to Smith’s translation, is a declaration about dedication and endurance somewhat out of place when read in the context of Smith’s whole sonnet sequence. More often, Smith writes of her desire for the oblivion in death that will finally end a wearied, toiling existence. In Sonnet IV, “To the moon,” she imagines the earth’s sufferers’ finding ultimate rest in the embrace of Diana, the classical goddess of the moon:

And oft I think—fair planet of the night,
That in thy orb, the wretched may have rest:
The sufferers of the earth perhaps may go,
Released by death—to thy benignant sphere; (7–10)

In Sonnet VI, “To hope,” she addresses Death directly, wishing it would come sooner:

Come then, “pale Misery’s love!” be thou my cure,
And I will bless thee, who, tho’ slow, art sure. (13–14)

However, Smith also values the everlasting heart, which she describes with contrasting images throughout the collection. In addition to the “burning breast” of Sonnet LXVIII, she refers to a benumbed state of chronic sorrow. Fortitude in Sonnet XXXV has a “cold breast” (3) that “braves / The beating storm, and bitter winds that howl” (1–2). The coldness of fortitude would seem to temper the burning heart while still preventing its melting away into nothing. Indeed the idea of seeking balance and relief is one that is frequent in and important to Smith’s poetry. While Petrarch’s Sonnet

5 Shakespeare’s King John (Smith’s citation)
145 lists a series of extreme conditions that Smith concludes will never extinguish his burning love, her sonnet to fortitude wishes to cope with emotional onslaughts not through painful suffering but a kind of cold-hearted strength that withstands the forces of nature and fate. In Sonnet LXVIII on the other hand, Smith seeks to endure through finding simple relief, and she devotes the first six lines to describing gifts from nature that would offset the heat of her burning heart and soothe her tear-suffused eyes:

Fall, dews of Heaven, upon my burning breast,
Bathe with cool drops these ever streaming eyes;
Ye gentle Winds, that fan the balmy West,
With the soft rippling tide of morning rise,
And calm my bursting heart‖ (1–5).

While Smith admires the intense passion of Petrarch, it seems that in terms of its relation to her own suffering, it is more the notion of continuity about burning love that strikes her, the notion that Petrarch had to endure overt time as she has. In her own sonnets, she describes the extremes of her suffering not by defiantly stating its ability to withstand any extreme condition, but by conveying a more realistic and relatable need to find relief; however, tacit in her wish for relief is her awareness of its inevitable disappointment.

Petrarch describes in his sonnets how he finds his own relief from the pain of separation from Laura. There is relief in imagining their eternal togetherness and in returning to places haunted by her memory. However, that he is able to imagine pain positively, as proof of his faithfulness, implies the nobility of his suffering. When one first reads the translation of Sonnet 145 in the context of the full sequence, the demand for further suffering to serve as testament to a higher purpose casts an even darker pall
over the sonnets written in Smith’s own voice. Petrarch’s request to “place me in the frigid zone, / On mountains of eternal snow” is oddly heartening compared to Smith’s request in Sonnet LXVIII for Heavenly rains and gentle winds to cool the scene’s burning, especially as “hopeless pain” prevails in the final four lines. Smith seems to see herself as connected to the passion and endless suffering of Petrarch, but the single romantic lament provides Petrarch with purpose and nobility that she cannot find in her own experiences. In “To fortitude,” endurance has no rewards for her:

Oh come! -- and shew how vain the cares that press
On my weak bosom -- and how little worth
Is the false fleeting meteor, Happiness, (5–7)

In facing the vanity of her suffering, Smith separates herself from Petrarch in an emotionally significant way, as she can never find any consolation but in the final sleep of death. The sonnets of Petrarch are, in one sense, a brief relief from the inconsolable despair of the collection. They describe suffering that despite its intensity provides the consolation of being essentially noble in the present and generative of eternal happiness in the future.

For Smith, one of the most important aspects of Petrarch’s passionate love for Laura is the painful transformation of joy into despair, for this is the very same transformation that poisons the growth into adulthood in her own poetry. Smith seems to value the parallel between the poignancy of uncontrollable love and the pain of having the thoughtless mirth of childhood deteriorate into the vain care of adulthood, as her translation of Sonnet XIV makes the most of the suspenseful possibility of falsity in Laura’s beauty. Her translation describes more fully the anxiety and risk inherent in
ascribing such importance to someone as “a goddess -- not a mortal maid” (10). Even though Laura’s beauty will not prove false, his suffering as a result of his intense love is still inevitable. Smith captures even more powerfully than the original the painful disappearance of the joy of loving Laura by painting a picture of Petrarch’s love that better balances an angelic and a human view of her. Smith’s Petrarch is more devoted to his beloved’s emotional qualities, and his joy in loving her is something more similar to the Heavenly, innocent joy of childhood. In the original Sonnet 90, Petrarch describes the intense, burning beauty that is unloosed when Laura is before him:

Erano i capei d’oro a l’aura sparsi
che ’n mille dolci nodi gli avolgea,
e ’l vago lume oltra misura ardea
di quei begli occhi, ch’ or ne son si scarsi.

She’d let her gold hair flow free in the breeze
that whirled it into thousands of sweet knots,
and lovely light would burn beyond all measure
in those fair eyes whose light is dimmer now. (Musa 145)

Smith retains the beaming beauty, but describes the object before him in more subtly perceptive terms that imply a deeper admiration:

Loose to the wind her golden tresses stream’d,
Forming bright waves with amorous Zephyr’s sighs;
And tho averted now, her charming eyes
Then with warm love, and melting pity beam’d. (1–4)

When Smith replaces sheer beauty, the “lovely light” that radiates from Laura’s eyes in the original version, with warm love and pity, it becomes these emotions rather than beauty that beam. His perception of pity in her eyes has the effect of melting him here, and these opening lines become more focused on describing the powerful
emotional effects she has on him than on visual descriptions. The power of Laura’s
effects on him, however, is not unusual. The departure Smith makes is in the subtlety of
his perceptions, as he appreciates warm love, melting pity, and the “fine suffusion on
thy cheek” (6).

This somewhat more complete love of Laura would certainly seem to dovetail
with arguments about Smith’s attempts to undermine Petrarch’s poetry, such as Moore’s
that she reverses the eroticism and objectification of women in Petrarch’s sonnets.
However, it seems that what is more important in Moore’s analysis than that reversal is
her point that Smith “revises Petrarchism” because her “sonnets omit the beloved,
focusing primarily on her own sensibility” (151). This is likely true, and it seems that
her revisions in part relate to her own love of childhood’s simple joy and peace, which
give way to the burning pain of various losses and hardships.

The increased sensitivity to a more profound goodness is an alteration that
brings Petrarch’s often eroticized and worshipful love closer to the fond visions of
childhood, through which the “happy child” of Sonnet V “To the South Downs” finds
joy and simple love in a warm and hospitable natural scene:

    Ah! hills belov’d!—Where once a happy child,
    Your beechen shades, “your turf, your flowers among,"
    I wove your blue-bells into garlands wild,
    And woke your echoes with my artless song.
    Ah! hills belov’d!—your turf, your flowers remain;
    But can they peace to this sad breast restore; (1-6)

The absence of peace in adulthood described in line six is echoed by the
dubiousness of Laura’s pity in Sonnet XIV:
And tho' averted now, her charming eyes
Then with warm love, and melting pity beam'd.
Was I deceived?—Ah! surely, nymph divine!
That fine suffusion on thy cheek was love. (3-6)

Both the sonnet to the South Downs and Smith’s translation of Petrarch describe moments at which the certainty of a simple but powerful joy has vanished. The “charming eyes” and the question of deception state more clearly the precarious, uncertain, and fragile emotional state of Petrarch’s original line, “non so se vero o falso mi parea” (“a pity true or false I did not know”; 6; Musa 145). Sonnet XIV emphasizes Petrarch’s loss of trust and security, his anxiety, and his lack of control over his love object. It is this precariousness about love she develops in her translation that parallels the important concerns of so many of her other sonnets. It relates to her descriptions of childhood joy as a kind of fragile, magically charmed bliss awaiting destruction, such as in Sonnet II:

...So frail, so fair,
Are the fond visions of thy early day,
Till tyrant Passion, and corrosive Care,
Bid all thy fairy colours fade away! (9-12)

The focus on vision in these lines is tied to the deceptive beauty in nature. So frequently she describes not quite the falsity of beauty, but its inability to bring her any joy in adulthood. For the adult who recalls the joy of earlier days, as for the starved lover, visions of beauty and Heavenly form are fleeting and promise bliss that proves delusive.

Smith’s version retains the essential value ascribed to Laura’s physical beauty, but it makes more apparent the sense that these “beauteous tints” are manifestations of a
more profound benevolence. Laura’s goodness and beauty are more enmeshed with one another than in the original, which seems to separate the two by rooting the poet’s perceptions of her goodness in his uncontrollable love rather than in Laura herself:

i’ che l’esca amorosa al petto avea,  
qual meraviglia se di subito arsi?

and I with all Love’s tinder in my breast—  
it’s no surprise that I soon caught on fire. (7–8; Musa 145)

Smith’s Petrarch locates warm love and pity in the Laura’s own visage. In this way, Smith’s Petrarch is more so a beholder of deep beauty than in the original, and more so a victim of his own appreciation for it. Even as his doubts threaten his joy and peace in admiring her, Smith’s translation describes a love more akin to the young Smith’s innocent love of the South Downs. As Smith portrays Petrarch as having an unfulfilled desire for a deeper, Heavenly goodness that is beyond physical form, she heightens the sense that the lover’s heart is prone to pain because of its own sensitivity. This finds many echoes throughout her poetry on childhood, such as in Sonnet LVIII, “The glow-worm”:

The happy child…  
He sees before his inexperienced eyes  
The brilliant Glow-worm, like a meteor, shine  
On the turf-bank;—amazed, and pleased, he cries,  
“Star of the dewy grass!6—I make thee mine!”—  
Then, ere he sleep, collects ‘the moisten’d’ flower,7  
And bids soft leaves his glittering prize enfold  
And dreams that Fairy-lamps illume his bower:  
Yet with the morning shudders to behold

---

6 “Star of the earth.” Dr. Darwin [Erasmus Darwin, Economy of Vegetation, I.196]. (Smith’s citation, bracketed portion is Curran’s elaboration [Curran 52])
7 “The moisten’d blade—” Walcot’s beautiful “Ode to the Glow-worm” (Smith’s citation)
His lucid treasure, rayless as the dust!
—So turn the world’s bright joys to cold and blank disgust. (2, 5–14).

Here the happy child’s joy in possessing the glow-worm seems primarily based on its radiant beauty, which has the power to inspire dreams about it and great distress at the realization that he cannot control it. The child has imagined into existence a significant bond with the glow-worm, and this vulnerability to beauty’s enchantments is surely related to “his inexperienced eyes” (5). The child’s attachment to the glow-worm is out of fascination with his radiance, but it is also deeply invested in the beautiful object for reasons that are unspoken. The power of beauty to inspire loving attachments within the sensitive person seems to unite the despairing lover and the forsaken child as Smith blends Petrarch’s voice with her own.

Manini notes that Smith’s Sonnet XV, a translation of Sonnet 279, underwent an important revision from its initial publication in the first edition of 1784 (100). Petrarch’s original poem concludes with a vision of Laura, which speaks to the grieving poet about her bliss now that she is in Heaven:

“Di me non pianger tu, ch’è miei di fersi,
morendo, eterni; et ne l’interno lume,
quando mostrai de chiuder, gli occhi apersi”

“Don’t weep for me, for my day has become through death eternal; into internal light my eyes were opened when they seemed to close.” (12–14; Musa 399).

Smith’s first translation of this, like the original, emphasizes Petrarch’s grief over the knowledge that his love has endured the pain of death. She stays true to
Petrarch’s notion of weeping *for* Laura rather than because of his pain at their separation:

> Ah! Wherefore should you mourn, that her you love, 
> Snatched from a world of woe, survives in bliss above! (13–14)

Unlike Petrarch’s poem, this earlier translation contrasts the “bliss above” with the woes of life on earth, and this renunciation of the world befits Smith’s greater sonnet sequence. Still, it is otherwise a relatively faithful restatement of the original sentiments. In her revised final couplet, Smith emphasizes the pain the poet feels from being without Laura, and it is no longer a weeping *for* Laura:

> Ah! yield not thus to culpable despair, 
> But raise thine eyes to Heaven—and think I wait thee there.” (13–14)

Manini points out that the change “emphasizes the consoling function of Laura” (100), but perhaps the more important revision is in the source of Petrarch’s sadness. In terms of emotional focus, the second translation centers solely on the poet’s own grief rather than his goddess’ having to suffer through death, and the lines imply that this grief is over his separation from her, as it may be alleviated by the hope of their eternal union in Heaven. Laura does indeed serve primarily as a source of consolation here, but the new ending also intends to continue the sonnet’s denunciation of sorrow as “vain and hopeless” (12) with the addition of “culpable despair” (13). Smith departs from Petrarch’s original here by developing the idea of pain that lacks purpose, seemingly a parallel to the vain suffering that she describes in “To fortitude.” Whereas in Sonnet XIII the suffering lover implied the nobility of his pain as evidence of his faithfulness, the revised ending of Sonnet XIV seems partially devoted to questioning the nobility of
suffering. Petrarch’s original sonnet as a whole seems to reinforce the power of his sighs as testimony of his love. As he imagines Laura questioning the reasons for his pain, he still paints a redeeming picture of suffering. Even though he wastes away before his time (9) and “a stream of sorrows” (11) issues from his eyes, there is still the romantic image of his “sitting there with love and thought in writing” (5).

Smith’s translation, in keeping with the tone of her sonnets generally, more clearly renounces suffering as vain, hopeless, and culpable. Despite this, there is still a certain high-mindedness about Smith’s suffering that befits the image of Petrarch sitting pensively and writing desperately. Throughout the Elegiac Sonnets, Smith imagines herself positively as a despairing, melancholic wanderer and poet, whose sufferings give her a “vain and hopeless sorrow” (12). Although when describing the emotional realities of often bankrupt terms such as sorrow and despair Smith accounts for feelings of futility and hopelessness. When constructing her literary persona, her suffering becomes a redemptive melancholy that connects her to an assortment of great literary precursors. These include, perhaps most importantly, Petrarch.

In Sonnet XVI, Smith translates Sonnet 301, in which Petrarch imagines that his griefs inhabit the landscape, swelling its rivers and valleys:

Valle che de’ lament miei se’ piene,
fiume che spesso del mio pianger cresci,
fere selvestre, vaghi augelli, et pesci
che l’una et l’altra verde riva affrena

Valley, so filled with my lamenting words,
River, that swells so often with my tears,
beasts of the woods, wandering birds and fish
contained between green shores on either side, (1–4; Musa 421)
In Smith’s rendering, she describes nature as a companion that has witnessed her happy days. While Petrarch projects his griefs onto the land, so that they fill the scene and inhabit its physical forms, Smith’s nature retains its alterity:

Ye vales and woods! fair scenes of happier hours;  
Ye feather’d people, tenants of the grove;  
And you, bright stream! befriended with shrubs and flowers;  
Behold my grief, ye witnesses of love! (1–4)

In much of Smith’s poetry, lacking a romantic equivalent for Laura, nature often stands in as the object of her love. Nature’s moods are never quite an extension of her own, but rather nature seems to inspire and behold her joy and sorrow. Nature is also something with which she interacts, and she captures this playfully in Sonnet II with her recollection of weaving blue-bell garlands and in Sonnet LVIII wherein she imagines the child chasing evening moths and collecting the glow-worm. Nature, represented by both the fleeting beauty of the glow-worm and the transience of spring, is an object that can both increase her happiness and wound her with its disappearance. In this way, Petrarch’s love for Laura is an important parallel to the Smith’s vanished joy in the landscape.

Yet elsewhere it seems that her ability to enjoy nature is product of the essential happiness of childhood, a joy that does not need nature to persist. She frequently describes a simple joy in childhood that is not reliant on external objects. In Sonnet XXVII, a thoughtless faith in Hope replaces Laura as the ray of light:

O happy age! when Hope’s unclouded ray  
Lights their green path, and prompts their simple mirth; (5–6)
The verdant landscapes recalled from childhood and seemingly the source of joy are certainly adored by Smith, but it would be artificial to say that they are ever quite the object of her love as Laura is for Petrarch. Nature is beloved for its association with childhood joy and hope, and this association is similar to how Petrarch describes the river banks in Sonnet 303:

Amor, che meco al buon tempo ti stavi
fra queste rive a’ pensier nostri amiche,
et per saldar le region nostre antiche
meco et col fiume ragionando andavi

Love, who in those good times would be with me
along these banks, the friends of all our thoughts,
and who, to settle all our old accounts,
would walk and talk with me and with the river; (1-4; Musa 423)

The river banks accompany his thoughts of love. It is not so much Laura in these lines that inspires him and makes him happy, it is his own dreams and thoughts of love, and nature is recalled fondly for its association with his prevailing hopefulness. The change in Smith’s translation of Sonnet 301 to depict nature as a beholder of joy seems to develop this idea of nature as a companion and friend rather than a source of joy. In Sonnet XVI, as in much of the Elegiac Sonnets, nature is thought of as the “fair scenes of happier hours” (1), and nature is here a beholder and a friend but never quite an object of love. Still, at other times, Smith speaks of her home ground in clearly loving terms, such as the “hills belov’d” of Sonnet V. Smith’s balancing of conceptions of nature as the object of her love and the beholder and companion of her joy relate the ambivalence she has towards the verdant scenes of childhood. They are at once reminders of both her happier early years and her loss hope and peace. Smith often
integrates into her descriptions of the landscape the sentiments she develops in her translations of Petrarch about undying love: when she sits among the turf and flowers of the South Downs, she feels a kind of Heavenly, innocent yearning for the warm love and peace it provides. At other times, she draws upon an alternate notion of nature developed in Sonnet XVI, nature as a witness to and friend in her earlier years. Smith’s use of the landscape thus befits the sense that, though she admires and is inspired by Petrarch’s faithful love, her own memories of joy and laments over her present sufferings remain distinct from but still strongly similar to those of Petrarch.
Chapter Two

Memory and Literary History in the South Downs Landscape

“The partial Muse, has from my earliest hours,
Smil'd on the rugged path I'm doom'd to tread,
And still with sportive hand has snatch'd wild flowers,
To weave fantastic garlands for my head:
But far, far happier is the lot of those
Who never learn'd her dear delusive art;
Which, while it decks the head with many a rose,
Reserves the thorn, to fester in the heart.
For still she bids soft Pity's melting eye
Stream o'er the ills she knows not to remove,
Points every pang, and deepens every sigh
Of mourning friendship or unhappy love.
Ah! then, how dear the Muse's favours cost,
If those paint sorrow best--who feel it most!”

Sonnet I may not be among Charlotte Smith’s most personally insightful or inviting poems, but it is probably one of her most ambitious. On the one hand, modern readers might find it has such highly conventional phrases and imagery that is among her poems most alien to us. On the other hand, its great strength is that it captures Smith as she reveals some of her most important sources of inspiration. First, there is the land. The poem is constructed out of images inspired by her memories of the South Downs landscape she loves. The “fantastic garlands” are a metaphor for poetic glory and creativity, but the image is pulled from her recollections of childhood, wherein the natural objects around her became her playthings. Second, the poem conveys the importance of the literary past. The concluding line rephrases the final line of Pope’s

---

8 Among the several references to garlands in the earliest poems (See note 4), Smith reveals the image’s place in her memory in Sonnet V, lines 1-4.
Eloisa to Abelard, in which the heroine hopes that a future poet will be inspired to about 
the love and separation of her and Abelard. Then, there is Smith’s own painful life 
story, the “rugged path” of her personal life.

Once readers become familiar with Smith’s desire to immerse herself in literary 
history and the local landscape, it becomes apparent that Sonnet I is the production of a 
mind attempting to fuse elements of personal experience, nature, and the influence of 
past writers. At times, the poet resorts heavily to personification and cloying phrases. 
The “partial Muse” and “soft Pity’s melting eye” do little but to show Smith’s 
construction of herself as destined to write poetry, and to foreshadow her willingness to 
express her grief in the most dramatic terms. Perhaps part of what saves it however is 
that Smith uses much of the same natural imagery that populates her most personal 
recollections of childhood. The wild flowers, garlands, and the rugged path -- these are 
seemingly stock materials in a poem that describes the creative process of a broad 
character type, the sensitive and sorrowful, but they are also among the objects most 
personal to her in the poems that follow. They are, on one level, conventional images 
used to generalize about a brand of writers. At a deeper level, they are convincingly 
meaningful to Smith.

Perhaps this is what makes us feel we are glimpsing an honest attempt to 
describe a personal creative process, however overshadowed it may be by 
ornamentation. The poem expresses her two-fold love of the land and the great 
sorrowful poets, mixing in figures from nature with abundant phrases and images that 
call to mind the literary conventions of the time and the intellectual influences upon her.
As she introduces herself and her poetic style to the audience, she is attempting to define a relation among herself, her literary idols, and the South Downs where she spent much of her life. Her poetic influences and physical surroundings are among her greatest loves. Naturally, they were closely connected to her conceptions of herself as writer, and they provided the resources for poetic creation. But Smith lacked a clear vision of how to portray their relation to one another. Could her favorite landscapes and her favorite writers from the past be considered fatefully tied together somehow? Smith needed another two years before she would begin to consider more seriously her physical surroundings and the ghosts of literary past that dwelt there.

Looking back on the full, ninety-two sonnet long collection, it appears that at this early stage the relation between the land that surrounded her and the writers that wrote about it was still undeveloped and unclear to her, and would evolve throughout subsequent editions. We find in the earliest poems of the Elegiac Sonnets that Smith works out a simple and fluid way of integrating the poets she admires into her own poetry about the land and her sufferings. Many of her favorites are loco-descriptive poets, such as William Cowper and Thomas Gray, who write about the beauties of their surrounding landscapes, and so she considers herself one of them, integrating their most memorable phrases into the scenes she paints so that the older poet’s sentiments blend into her own. Smith originally did not wish to draw attention to her use of quotation, and in the first edition the phrases she uses go un-credited. Certain poetic phrases stuck with her and must have contributed greatly to her romantic image of the poet amidst nature. These phrases, which perhaps had slipped subconsciously into her own repertory
slip just as subtly into the syntax of her poems, such as in the opening of Sonnet V, “To the South Downs.”

Ah! hills belov’d -- where once a happy child,
Your beechen shades, “your turf, your flowers among,”
I wove your blue-bells into garlands wild,
And woke your echoes with my artless song. (1-4)

At this early stage in the collection, the writers she admires and the landscapes she describes work together to create a brand of poetry that express original experience partially through the words of others. Adela Pinch has concisely states that Smith’s integration of phrases from England’s literary past broadly, from Shakespeare and Milton to Otway and Young, constitutes “a poetry that is formally made out of other poems” (61). Pinch’s phrase is concise and accurate. However, by stressing only the formal aspect rather than the meanings of Smith’s poems and borrowed phrases, Pinch also hints at how perfunctory Smith’s earliest references to past poets sometimes could be. It would only be through her increasing interest in her local poets that a more meaningful relationship between land and literature would begin to emerge. Familiar locales undoubtedly had a profound effect on Smith from the very start of the Sonnets. At the sight of the sprawling South Downs hillsides, she is often moved to recollect

---

9 Pinch’s chapter in Strange Fits of Passion explores how Smith’s poetry illustrates the transfer of emotion from one writer to another through language. She makes sensibly points out that Smith’s quotations serve largely as adornments. “Smith’s sonnets are like echo chambers, in which reverberates direct quotations, ideas, and tropes from English poetry. The fundamental unit around which Smith’s sonnets seem to be based is not so much the image, or even the individual word or line, but rather the artful, pathetic phrase. It is a poetry of sound bites, noun clusters which describe emotional states or the afflicted...” She adds that these phrases rarely have much significance to the meaning of her poems: “As is often the case in the mid- to late eighteenth-century poetry in which this kind of echolalia reigns, it usually does not make sense to try to interpret Smith’s echoes of other texts thematically” (60).
sadly her lost childhood, yet there was in the earliest poems never a single spot that produced the magical sensations of melancholy and supernatural presence that would come later in the third edition’s sonnets about the Arun and Thomas Otway, some of the greatest poems she ever wrote.

Smith may have written the opening sonnet during a period of her adult life in which she was able to enjoy the pleasures of the peaceful countryside. Her years at Lys Farm were begun in 1774 and lasted till the summer of 1784, and biographer Loraine Fletcher speculates it was here that Smith spent much of her time composing the earliest of her surviving poems, and returning to the simple enjoyment of walking and collecting plants and flowers (42, 47). Throughout Sonnet I she mixes descriptions of natural objects into the telling of her fate as a mournful poet, and a kind of playfulness in nature pervades these earliest sonnets, perhaps most often in the recurring image of garland weaving. Leading up to the first publication of the *Elegiac Sonnets* in May 1784, she had also been spending much of her time since the previous December with her debt-ridden husband Benjamin Smith at King’s Bench Prison (Curran, xxi-ii).

Regardless of whether she was at Lys Farm or confined with Benjamin, thoughts of nature would have been an especially invaluable comfort during this period of back-and-forth between home and debtors’ prison. The opening sonnet’s description of the Muse’s sportive hand weaving fantastic garlands evinces the poet’s playful joy amidst nature, probably a very real sensation for Smith at this point in her life.

---

10 Other references to garlands appear in Sonnet II (1), Sonnet V, (3), Sonnet 6, (12) in a line borrowed from Pope, and Sonnet 19 (1-2).
The image foreshadows a theme that will become more important to Smith in the writing of the sonnets added in the third edition of 1786: the Muse’s partiality not only to writers of her sensitive constitution, but also to the natural surroundings she inhabits. In these opening lines, Smith imagines her head adorned with fantastic garlands, the Muse’s gift of poetic glory, which are sewn out of the wild flowers along her path.

The partial Muse has from my earliest hours
Smiled on the rugged path I’m doom’d to tread,
And still with sportive hand has snatch’d wild flowers,
To weave fantastic garlands for my head; (1-4)

Here, Smith does not overtly identify the wild flowers with a specific location, but rather she uses them to reify the concepts of poetic glory and a life of suffering. The latter, which Smith calls “the rugged path” of her life, finds its reflection in the rustic countryside in subsequent poems. But early on, the idea of nature as a direct source of inspiration for her poetry is never straightforward. The natural scenes seem disconnected from her ruminations on her various sufferings at the hands of society. Both nature and human woes are the roots of her poetry, but the objects in nature she describes are used largely to depict the contrasting awfulness of the world.

As she addresses the land in Sonnet V, “To the South Downs” and recalls the verdant scenes of early youth, Smith describes the South Downs as a childhood playground, an Eden whose persistent beauty and cycles of renewal are also a painful reminder of the transience of human joy. She recollects her natural idyll not to describe a moment of inspiration but in order to convey feelings of lost hope and world-
weariness, and we see that the emotional source of her poems, the reflections and
mournful tone essential to her elegies, come not from nature itself, but from the strains
of growth into adulthood, from passion and corrosive care.

Ah! Hills belov’d!—where once a happy child,
Your beechen shades, “your turf, your flowers among,“
I wove your blue-bells into garlands wild,
And woke your echoes with my artless song.
Ah! Hills belov’d!—your turf, your flowers remain;
But can they peace to this sad breast restore;
For one poor moment soothe the sense of pain,
And teach a breaking heart to throb no more?
And you, Aruna!—in the vale below,
As to the sea your limpid waves you bear,
Can you one kind Lethean cup bestow,
To drink a long oblivion to my care?
Ah! no!—when all, e’en Hope’s last ray is gone,
There’s no oblivion—but in death alone!

The wild flowers and the rugged path of Sonnet I are both symbolic of her
personal hardships and her physical surroundings. However, that the Muse is partial
towards a “rugged path” that represents an actual, physical location is an idea that never
fully develops throughout the first edition’s original sixteen sonnets. The South Downs
here in Sonnet V is home to childhood happiness, peace, and Hope, but as it echoes the
child’s “artless song,” Smith implies that the child once engaged with the land in a
simple form of emotional expression quite different from the “dear delusive art” of
poetry described in Sonnet I. From the outset, she begins sketching a philosophy of
poetic composition that requires the writer to engage personal despair as much as the
land.

While recollecting her love of her home turf, Smith’s poems about the South
Downs encourage the question of whether this land that is so attached to memory can remain a source of inspiration, or if she is by now, having so long ago lost the simple joys of youth, only capable of finding in nature a trigger for grief. Sonnet V, like her later Sonnet XVII, is significantly based on Thomas Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College.” Like its descendant, Sonnet V does not easily offer up convincing answers to questions about its primary inspiration. Both Smith’s and Gray’s poems depict specific, at first comforting locations as cause for mournful meditations on the loss of youth. Whether it is the feelings of loss that she connects to the sight of her beloved hills, or whether it is the hills themselves -- the question of the poem’s emotional source, its inspiration, is a tricky one to consider in a sonnet that declares both her love and her loss.

The landscape as a source of pain is an idea Smith associates with Petrarch as well. Sonnet V is much like his sonnets after the death of Laura, in that it explores the relationship between the mourner and the setting of his or her earlier happiness. Petrarch, like Smith, is reveals how painful this relationship becomes when the mourner so strongly associates the land with memories of departed happiness. In Sonnet XVI, Smith chooses a poem of Petrarch’s in which he identifies the land’s birds as the “witnesses of love” (4) and beholders of his “infant passions” (5). In her translation, like in the original, the land is figured as the background for emotions in the past, and the cause for feelings of loss in the present. Similarly, in Smith’s poem, the cyclical renewal of nature’s beauty functions as a painful reminder of both her lost innocent happiness, and her inability to find consolation as she suffers the various pains of adult
life. Smith’s earliest sonnets about the South Downs treat nature in much the same way as Petrarch’s. As elegies, they draw their inspiration from a chronic sensation of loss, triggered by and described out of doors.

Smith’s sonnets to the South Downs in the first edition are often considered as a group by some critics to be among her most innovative works. Carrol L. Fry notes that Sonnet V in particular “shows evidence of a lyrical voice and an appreciation of nature that transcends the generalities of her early work...she relies less on abstract language and neoclassical conventions such as personification than she does in most of the other sonnets in the first edition” (19). Fry does not specify a point in the poem at which Smith moves beyond generalities, but given her praise of Smith as a regional poet, it is likely that she is in large part impressed by Smith’s address to the Arun River: “And you, Aruna! -- in the vale below” (9). Other natural objects in the poem, the “limpid waves” (10), “beechen shades” (2) and “blue-bells” woven into “garlands wild” (2) add little in the way of detailed observation, and these descriptions show of what mixed quality Smith’s earliest attempts at loco-description really could be. The first four lines mix the present with the past, addressing the hills now and charging it with recollection from when the poet was “once a happy child” (1). The “beechen shades” and “blue-bells” recall only species of tree and flower, a lack of particularity that seems appropriate in her description of recollected images. Yet, when she addresses in the present the Arun River “in the vale below,” she creates a sense of immediacy that her rough description of “limpid waves” fails to match. Fry argues that Sonnet V “demonstrates an approach to nature that would appear more frequently and in more
sophisticated fashion in Smith’s poetry as her art matured: an establishment of correspondence between nature and the experience or mood of the persona” (19). Fry’s comment is not incorrect when considering many moments in Smith’s early sonnets, but in Sonnet V, it is difficult to find the correspondence of moods that she points out. It is perhaps even difficult to consider nature to be the primary inspiration for the poem. Thorough, authentic, and spontaneous description is secondary to Smith’s desire to convey the loss of “Hope’s last ray,” a sentiment independent of nature and expressive of the difficulties she faced throughout her life.

However, in her most memorable moments, Smith moves past using nature as a mere background for general reflections on life and society. At time she succeeds in writing poetry that seems the product of close attention to and authentic experience in nature, such as in her rich descriptions of plant life in Sonnet VIII, “To Spring”:

Again the wood, and long-withdrawing vale,
In many a tint of tender green are drest,
Where the young leaves, unfolding, scarce conceal
Beneath their early shade, the half-form’d nest
Of finch or woodlark; and the primrose pale,
And lavish cowslip, wildly scatter’d round,
Give their sweet spirits to the sighing gale. (1–7)

Here Smith mixes objective observation with emotional impression in the “tint of tender green” (2). The perspective is close and attentive to smaller figures, the “young leaves, unfolding” (3) that mostly hides the “half-form’d nest” (4) still visible to the poet’s keen eye. She immerses her voice within the vale, in and amidst the “lavish cowslip, wildly scatter’d round” (6). Despite this promising beginning, the poem emphasizes not immediate emotional reactions to the surrounding scene but her chronic
pain due to the attrition of a lifetime of misfortune. The poem culminates in a lament about the persistence of her despair:

Ah! season of delight!—could aught be found
To soothe awhile the tortured bosom’s pain,
Of Sorrow’s rankling shaft to cure the wound,
And bring life’s first delusions once again,
“Twere surely met in thee! thy prospect fair,
Thy sounds of harmony, thy balmy air,
Have power to cure all sadness—but despair. (8–14)

Her reflections and emotions in Sonnet V and Sonnet VIII are ones ingrained through years of suffering at the hands of fate and society, and these invade her perceptions of the external scene and her resulting memories of childhood joy. These sorrowful, embittered reflections redirect a sonnet that initially seems to describe a deeply felt reaction to her immersion in a beloved locale, which is connected to a memory resulting from nature’s surrounding presence. The interplay of scene, memory, and past and present feelings seems an auspicious start to an authentic, reflective and spontaneously inspired poem, but as descriptions of despair and hopelessness displace those of the wild joy described in the landscape itself, Smith’s sentiments of loss and care in adulthood that prevail throughout the *Elegiac Sonnets* displace nature as the compelling primary source of poetic inspiration.

If Smith struggles to write a full poem in which her thoughts are believably inspired by a natural scene, Sonnet XII, with its rugged sea-shore setting, is the primary exception. Here, her solitary immersion in the scene causes her to imagine herself being physically dissolved into it in the poem’s final lines.

On some rude fragment of the rocky shore,
Where on the fractured cliff the billows break,
Musing, my solitary seat I take,
And listen to the deep and solemn roar.

O’er the dark waves the winds tempestuous howl;
The screaming sea-bird quits the troubled sea:
But the wild gloomy scene has charms for me,
And suits the mournful temper of my soul.

Already shipwreck’d by the storms of Fate,
Like the poor mariner, methinks, I stand,
Cast on a rock; who sees the distant land
From whence no succour comes -- or comes too late.
Faint and more faint are heard his feeble cries,
‘Till in the rising tide the exhausted sufferer dies.

The “wild gloomy scene” (7) described here is a powerful catalyst of reflections on death and composition, as it fosters thoughts of doom and abandonment. By stating the poem’s creative origins in the title, “Written on the sea shore. -- October 1784,” Smith describes a single moment in a particular location and its conduciveness to the composition of her mournful poetry, yet she refrains from depicting the land as enchanted for poetic creation. Instead, she develops a more complex impression of her artistry’s birth. The poet’s own musings and mournful temperament are just as essential to the production of poetic thoughts as the fractured cliffs and howling winds. The poem is thus product of the fortuitous coming together of mournful poet and gloomy scenery. Smith here identifies herself as thinker, mourner, the forsaken and the exhausted person, but as she takes her seat on the sea shore at this stage in the *Elegiac Sonnets*’ development, she is yet to explore a particular relationship between *artist* and landscape. Sonnet XII elaborates on the Muse’s partiality to place hinted at in Sonnet I, but it does not go quite so far as to push the idea of a locale enchanted for poetic
production. This she would develop later, in the third edition’s sonnets to the Arun River.

“Ever sacred to the sons of song”: The Sonnets to the Arun River

In a series of sonnets to the Arun River first appearing in the third edition, Smith reveals a powerful new conception of her natural surroundings. In these sonnets, Smith imagines the land haunted by the literary spirits of the past that she loves, and for the first time in the collection, she expresses a sensation of joy in the present, as the land serves as an intermediary between her and the ghosts of the past. Sonnets XXVI and XXX share the title “To the River Arun,” and depict the river as a place sanctified as a home for lovers and mourners. The latter poem also strives to document the region’s literary past by painting the river banks as Collins, Hayley, and Otway’s great shared source of inspiration. Sonnet XXXII, “To melancholy, Written on the banks of the Arun, October 1785” and Sonnet XXXIII, “To the naiad of the Arun” further develop the region’s rustic, lonesome image and its status as a place with a special link to poetic genius. In Sonnet I, Smith had vaguely referred to the Muse’s partiality towards her natural surroundings with the “rugged path” fringed with the wild flowers that would form her garland crown. In Sonnet XVI, the first of the Arun sonnets, she writes more overtly of her home area as an inconspicuous place with a surprisingly brilliant past, which creates a peculiar air in the present.

On thy wild banks, by frequent torrents worn,
No glittering fanes, or marble domes appear,
Yet shall the mournful Muse thy course adorn,
And still to her thy rustic waves be dear.  
For with the infant Otway, lingering here,  
    Of early woes she bade her votary dream,  
While thy low murmurs sooth’d his pensive ear,  
    And still the poet -- consecrates the stream.  
Beneath the oak and birch that fringe thy side,  
The first-born violets of the year shall spring;  
And in thy hazles, bending o’er the tide,  
The earliest nightingale delight to sing;  
While kindred spirits, pitying, shall relate  
Thy Otway’s sorrows, and lament his fate!

As the Muse smiles on the Arun’s course, Sonnet XXVI moves inspiration into the land itself, departing from her earlier sonnets’ conceptions of the rugged landscape as primarily a parallel to her life’s hardships, or as a site that fosters only her preexisting gloomy pensiveness. In the earlier sonnets, Smith refrains from depicting the landscape as the source of poetic inspiration. Instead, she implies that it offers her emotional consolation, as when she pensively writes on the sea shore that the setting “has charms” for her and “suits the mournful temper” of her soul. Here however, Smith feels the supernatural presence of “the infant Otway, lingering here” (5), and the sonnet’s opening lines herald a theme new to the collection: the presence of a lineage of local poets that haunt the banks of the Arun and make the region a place consecrated for poetic creation. In the four sonnets to the Arun, Smith describes the Muse as favoring the region’s poets over the generations. She is most affected by the doomed Thomas Otway, first mentioned in Sonnet XXVI. She also describes the melancholy tone of William Collins’ “powerful shell,” and William Hayley in Sonnet XXX; she then names both poets again in a footnote to Sonnet XXXIII. The Arun landscape becomes in these sonnets a way for Smith to access poetic genius.
Smith’s vision of Thomas Otway’s ghost in Sonnet XXVI is an important moment in the development of her poetic persona, for it is here that she begins more exactly to define herself as a poet, whose inspiration is found in the land, to great extent because of its literary past. When the visionary sonnet is published in 1786, it is an innovation in the collection, for earlier Smith is less concerned with literary self-definition and more concerned with exploring the personal aspects of her kinship with her literary forebears. Earlier in the collection, in her translations of sonnets from the Canzoniere, she identifies with Petrarch in personal terms through his faithful despair, rather than emphasizing their shared status as writers. Rather than focusing on defining herself as poet, Smith throughout much of the first edition focuses on describing a sensibility of mournfulness and intellect that she shares with others. Smith is frequently consoled by her kinship with “pale sorrow’s victims” (III, 9), and the “children of Despair and Woe” (IV, 11). Smith at times prioritizes depicting herself as a character type, emphasizing her place among others of the same emotional disposition, a sensibility that is shared through the ages, rather than her own, singular emotional experiences.

Smith frequently differentiates between herself and others in highly general terms that do not probe the individuals in great depth. Sonnet IX is a good example of the need for character types that perhaps is necessitated to some extent by the shortness of the sonnet. In Sonnet IX, Smith contemplates the differences between herself and a shepherd, implicitly categorizing herself as one of the “children of Knowledge and Sentiment born” (12) that she mentions. Here Smith dedicates the sonnet largely to
constructing a contrast of emotional types. As opposed to the mournful children of sentiment and knowledge, there is the fortunate shepherd:

Blest is yon shepherd, on the turf reclined,
Who on the varied clouds which float above
Lies idly gazing -- while his vacant mind
Pours out some tale of antique rural love! (1–4)

These opening lines offer a solitary figure and thus seem to promise insight into his heart and mind. Yet in only a very compact expression, these four lines take an unexpected turn. What we learn is that the lone shepherd presents a contrast in appearances and reality. He is at first, on the surface, not unlike the bemused solitary wanderer of Sonnet XXXVI, which Smith would publish two years later:

Should the lone Wanderer, fainting on his way,
Rest for a moment of the sultry hours,
And tho’ his path thro’ thorns and roughness lay,
Pluck the wild rose, or woodbine’s gadding flowers,
Weaving gay wreaths beneath some sheltering tree,
The sense of sorrow he awhile may lose; (1–6)

The sorrow-stricken wanderer, like the enviably vacant-minded shepherd, is at home amidst the landscape. The wanderer’s playful plucking of wild roses mirrors the comfort of the shepherd as he lies blissfully on the grass. However, the wanderer is unlike the shepherd in that he is, inside and out, the quintessential lone figure. He is, as one anticipates, thoughtful and sorrowful, while the solitary shepherd unexpectedly ends up lacking the emotional depth of the quintessential figure in Sonnet XXXVI. He and the life he has led are the antitheses of everything Smith identifies herself and her own experiences as, and thus she envies them even as she belittles his “rude bosom” (11). Smith sketches the vacant-minded shepherd’s mental and emotional constitution
through negation, through contrasts with her own experiences; these reveal the shepherd as a character of little depth or interest in his own right, a construction through which Smith is able again to explore her superiority to the rudeness and thoughtlessness of general society.

Ah! he has never felt the pangs that move Th’ indignant spirit, when with selfish pride, Friends, on whose faith the trusting heart rely’d, Unkindly shun the imploring eye of woe! The ills they ought to soothe, with taunts deride, And laugh at tears themselves have forced to flow. Nor his rude bosom those fine feelings melt, Children of Sentiment and Knowledge born, Thro’ whom each shaft with cruel force is felt, Empoison’d by deceit -- or barb’d with scorn. (5–14)

This definition by negation shows the imaginative aspect inherent in her understanding of the shepherd, and they convey her isolation from a society with which she is largely incompatible. Interestingly, in a sonnet that foregrounds and is inspired by the appearance of another, the poet’s insight into his character is limited and inherently flawed, as it is based on assumptions resulting from her own experiences and acceptance of character types. The sonnet intentionally avoids depth of description into the individual, as Smith uses the image of the idly gazing shepherd as a means of exploring a sensibility honed by experiences related to society, here specifically the betrayals of friendship.

In this earlier sonnet then, Smith is exploring a sensibility that is not in fact directly tied to one’s relation to the landscape. Closeness with nature is but an appearance that belies the shepherd’s actual mental and sentimental rudeness. Smith
emphasizes the ways in which her sensitive constitution has been shaped by the cruel force of society rather than by nature. In painting a scene and responding to it, the objective, observed scene is altered by Smith’s own expectations and assumptions. The shepherd lies idle (3), in no clear way particularly blessed, yet Smith through sheer imagination turns this into an idyllic scene acted out by a character who serves principally as an instrument of her frustrations.

Mary Moore helpfully points out that these lines suggest the shepherd is a poet himself, arguing that the sonnet’s first four lines indicate Smith’s desire to differentiate herself poetically from a masculine, stale form of pastoral poetry, the “tale antique of rural love” (4), and to chart out new territory by attempting a more personal and sincere approach to writing about the landscape (158). Moore’s observation of some attempt on Smith’s part at literary self-definition is persuasive given the first sonnet’s concern for those who paint sorrow best.

While Moore focuses on the gender specificity of the italicized ‘he,’ the singular pronoun also emphasizes the contrasting pluralized children, creating a subtle irony. The poem aims to depict Smith’s exceptional intellect and sensitivity, yet it is she who is imagined in the company of others. Even as the discrepancy between pluralized children of sentiment and a singular shepherd would seem to undermine her exceptional status, Smith is frequently concerned with legitimizing her emotional constitution by aligning herself with literary greats. Tacitly, the children of knowledge and sentiment, and “pale sorrow’s victims” of Sonnet III, are also “those who paint sorrow best.” It is only with great subtlety that Smith in her earliest sonnets aligns herself with the great
poets. Her ventriloquizations of Petrarch, Metastasio, and Werther serve to legitimize her despairing nature and act as kindred spirits of sensibility; yet these sonnets do not seem to prioritize her shared status as writer.

Still, in Sonnet IX, Smith does offer some consideration of herself as a writer, although it is buried under the sonnet’s greater concern, which is to distinguish herself from the shepherd in terms of character. While the poem concerns itself largely with sketching the shepherd’s character, his “vacant mind” and his rude heart, it refers subtly to Smith’s role as poet. It is important to note that here Smith’s portrayal of herself in a literary context functions at a deeper level than the poem’s explorations of her sentimental disposition. Early in the development of the *Elegiac Sonnets*, the fact that Smith is a poet is submerged by descriptions of her breaking heart, streaming eyes, anxious breast, and it is not until the sonnets to the Arun that Smith begins to fulfill the promise of the first sonnet, to bring her status as poet to the fore and begin to define her physical surroundings in relation to the lingering presence of past poets who lived there.

In the octave of Sonnet XXVI, Smith describes Thomas Otway’s early life on the banks of the Arun. She describes an “infant Otway” destined for poetic greatness and hints at his growth into a life of wildness that mirrors the rustic river banks.

On thy wild banks, by frequent torrents worn,
No glittering fanes, or marble domes appear,
Yet shall the mournful Muse thy course adorn,
And still to her thy rustic waves be dear.
For with the infant Otway, lingering here,
Of early woes she bade her votary dream,
While thy low murmurs sooth’d his pensive ear,
And still the poet -- consecrates the stream. (1–8)
In terms of poetic achievement alone, this sonnet is remarkable enough. Of all the poems accumulated in the third edition, what Smith transmits to the reader in these eight lines is a sensation that is possibly more difficult to articulate than any she has created thus far. It is a sensation of wildness and uncertainty produced by the coexistence of opposites: calmness and motion, youth and age. Smith creates a contrast between the worn and torn landscape and the unspoiled youth of the young Otway. The banks of the Arun are weathered, and the visual and auditory descriptions paint a scene that lacks brightness and definition. The “low murmurs” of the stream’s waves accompany a visual scene only faintly sketched to convey its lack of majesty. Rather than showing the reader through vivid visual description, the poem uses brief but conflicting descriptions of the banks and waves, which are both peaceful and wild, in order to capture the scene’s intense energy. The “wild banks,” “frequent torrents” (1), and the sounds of the “rustic waves” crashing upon one another disturb the peace of the soothing “low murmurs” and the silently lingering ghost of Otway. These eight lines constitute a collision of opposites, creating a feeling of the ebb and flow that erode the banks. The descriptions of vibrancy in the “glittering fanses” and wild banks disrupt the descriptions of placidity, dreaminess, and quiet pensiveness that follow, creating a poem that is disturbed from the start.

These eight lines mark the first point in the collection at which Smith describes feeling the ghostlike presence of a deceased person, and this sensation pervades the sonnets to the Arun that follow as well. Smith had described something faintly similar to this in Sonnet IV “To the Moon,” wherein the sight of her trembling shadow in the
moonlight prompts a moment of reflection on death and the afterlife. Before Sonnet XXVI, “To the Moon” is the only poem in Smith’s own voice in which she contemplates a destination for the deceased and something more elaborate than the eternal oblivion of death. The poem begins by describing her habit of walking pensively along a stream by the light of the moon. In a seemingly fragile moment of peace, she remains attuned to the slightest and most silent movements made by the natural objects that surround her.

Queen of the silver bow! -- by thy pale beam,
Alone and pensive, I delight to stray,
And watch thy shadow trembling in the stream,
Or mark the floating clouds that cross thy way

What Smith describes in these four lines is not quite a single, authentic moment, but rather an idealized portrait of herself as a lone figure. Still, there is great subtlety in the way her thoughts are stirred by the subtle energies that pass to her from the moon’s beams and illuminate the scene, just as the invisible forces of nature, the unmentioned winds, produce a shudder on the stream’s surface and move the clouds along their nocturnal course. The sight of the moon prompts her to contemplate the fate of the deceased after death.

And while I gaze, thy mild and placid light
Sheds a soft calm upon my troubled breast;
And oft I think -- fair planet of the night,
That in thy orb the wretched may have rest:
The sufferers of the earth perhaps may go,
Released by death -- to thy benignant sphere;
And the sad children of Despair and Woe
Forget, in thee, their cup of sorrow here.
Oh! that I soon may reach thy world serene,
Poor wearied pilgrim -- in this toiling scene! (5–14)
More so than in Sonnet XXVI, Smith here expresses a moment of whimsical musing than a believable, sincerely felt sensation of presence. At this early stage in the development of the collection, Smith explores the idea of life after death by imagining that the deceased sufferers continue to exist in a “world serene” (13), a phrase that hints at some sort of heaven but that in the poem never really becomes substantially more than the familiar concept of comfortable oblivion. Her thoughts here do not express a religious conception of eternal life, and the poem avoids creating any sensation of haunting presence as in Sonnet XXVI. It ponders the possibility of something other than non-existence after death, yet it never really conveys anything like a lingering spirit, such as that of the infant Otway in the later poem. The deceased take on a new kind of existence, faintly conceived by Smith, whose only comparable sublunary states are sleep and forgetfulness.

Smith’s portrayal of the moon as the residence of the deceased sufferers is so heavily tied to classical symbolism\(^\text{11}\) that her evening reflections likely seem artificial and conventional compared to the sentiments of Sonnet XXVI, in which she

\(^{11}\) Smith depicts her thoughts on suffering and eternity as being engendered directly by the sight of the moon, an object that Smith values largely for its symbolic importance. Jacqueline Labbe notes that in addressing the sonnet to the “Queen of the silver bow,” Smith refers to Diana, the Roman huntress (Labbe 219). Representative of the wilderness and savageness (OCD 463), Diana is an appropriate heroine for Smith, who herself gravitates to the rocky shore in Sonnet XII and eventually to the wild banks of the Arun. However, the symbolic implication that comes across more strongly in the context of this sonnet is Diana as goddess of women and childbirth. The “fair planet of the night” (7) is the object of Smith’s admiring gaze, and it possesses a delicate beauty as its “pale beam” (1) and “mild and placid light” accompany her on her pensive walk. By referring to the moon as Queen and orb (8), images of motherhood and pregnancy, and by referring to the sufferers of despair and woe as children (11), Smith hints that she sees the moon as a reflection of herself in the firmament. She both relates to the lone mother figure and takes heart in the hope of returning to her comforting and peaceful embrace.
convincingly describes her belief that the Arun River banks are a kind of holy ground on which “kindred spirits” can relish the memory of Otway and experience a mysterious beauty in nature. More authentic and naturally inspired than “To the Moon,” Sonnet XXVI adopts the earlier sonnet’s idea that the ghosts of the past persist somewhere, but here their living kindred spirits are able to connect with them in a specific location. However, unlike the earlier work, in the sestet of Sonnet XXVI this location is tangible and immediate, the very banks the poet treads frequently and adopts as her own.

Beneath the oak and birch that fringe thy side,
The first-born violets of the year shall spring;
And in thy hazles, bending o’er the tide,
The earliest nightingale delight to sing:
While kindred spirits, pitying, shall relate
Thy Otway’s sorrows, and lament his fate! (9–14)

Smith, for the first time, finds that the comfort she gains from her immediate surroundings is connected to a past that is not her own. It is a comfort available to anyone who is receptive to the tale of Otway’s sorrows. Absent is anything similar to the collection’s earlier reminiscences on her own childhood and the notion that they consecrate the sprawling hillsides of the South Downs, such as in Sonnet V. Here, instead of conjuring personal memories, the land prompts thoughts of a fellow poet and doomed person whose lingering spirit inspires her to write and elevates her mood to a soothing melancholy. The notion of a landscape haunted by a spirit that is creatively inspiring and beloved hearkens back to sentiments Smith had explored earlier in her translations of Petrarch. Smith’s translations focus on the grief-stricken lover’s complicated relationship with the lands that call to mind thoughts of the deceased. Her
Petrarch in Sonnet XV prefaces his vision of Laura’s ghost with a description of “the green leaves” (1), “the lucid stream” (3), and “the fretted rock” (4), forms that have the mysterious power to both conceal and reveal the deceased. Physically, these objects distance Petrarch from Laura, as the earth becomes a container for her body into which the poet cannot see. Despite this, they still are conducive to the pensive state from which the vision of Laura grows.

Where the green leaves exclude the summer beam,  
And softly bend as balmy breezes blow,  
And where with liquid lapse, the lucid stream  
Across the fretted rock is heard to flow,  
Pensive I lay: when she whom earth conceals,  
As if still living to my eyes appears,  
And pitying Heaven her angel form reveals (1–7)

Gazing into the lucid stream reveals only the rocks over which it flows, and Laura remains hopelessly concealed. Yet the repetition of “where” (1, 3) simultaneously emphasizes the importance of place to the vision. The opening line describes a setting of solitude, from which the daylight is excluded and into which the poet is immersed, and thus it becomes a place that possesses a unique kind of enchantment. In general terms, these lines consider a relation among the mourning lover, the natural surroundings, and the love object, which is considered both physically as a body and spiritually as a perfect, Heavenly entity with the power to remedy the mourner’s sorrow. The sense that the specific spot is enchanted for spiritual healing is never simple because the poem emphasizes Petrarch’s role in providing the scene with its supernatural quality. It seems to be a product of the poet’s pensiveness, his thoughts of love and grief, rather than to be coming from a lingering spirit of Laura. Still, regardless
of whether or not the location is thought to bear the spirit of the departed or the memories of the poet’s grieving, the Petrarch translations hint that it had been just this notion of a specific location’s association with an individual that attracted Smith to Petrarch in the writing of the first edition. It is an association between land and the memory of another that is somewhat unclear and would later be honed by Smith in the sonnets to the Arun. Sonnet XVI also describes a setting that contains not the ghost of Laura, but rather the griefs she inspired in the poet himself.

Ye vales and woods! fair scenes of happier hours;  
Ye feather’d people, tenants of the grove;  
And you, bright stream! befringed with shrubs and flowers;  
Behold my grief, ye witnesses of love!

For ye beheld my infant passions rise,  
And saw thro’ years unchang’d my faithful flame;  
Now cold, in dust, the beauteous object lies,  
And you, ye conscious scenes, are still the same! (1–8)

In Sonnet XV and Sonnet XVI, Smith translates Sonnets 279 and 301 from the Canzoniere. These are among the nine poems written that refer to Petrarch’s return to Vaucluse. It was in Vaucluse that Petrarch spent his twenty-eighth year, cultivating his love for Laura through memory and imagination in a setting he specifically preferred for its distance from her. The reason the landscape is haunted primarily by his griefs

12 Sara Sturm-Maddox points out the precise series of sonnets that refers to Petrarch’s second residence in Vaucluse, or Valchiusa: “A second sequence, in Part II, confirms that after the death of Laura this landscape remains the catalyst for the poet’s memory and the setting for his lament. Within the span of components between the commemoration of the third anniversary of her death (278) and the affirmation that he goes searching through every region where he has seen her (306), no fewer than nine poems clustered into two groups evoke the landscape of Valchiusa” She also notes the nuanced ways in which Petrarch depicts his relationship with the land: “In 279-82 it is the setting of Laura’s imagined reappearance; in 301 and 303-5, it witnesses the poet’s grief” (Sturm-Maddox 73). The land as the witness to grief is preserved in Smith’s translation.
over Laura in these original sonnets, rather than by the spirit of the woman herself, is that Vaucluse was in part the poet’s refuge from the living Laura, whom he had known primarily in Avignon, some fourteen miles away. These lines, penned many years later for the second part of the *Canzoniere*, are concerned with the physical disappearance of Laura from the earth and the persistence of the poet’s griefs in a landscape that represented her absence and his solitude. Vaucluse is a place Petrarch did not associate with Laura’s actual, physical presence, but rather with her presence in mind. The physical forms around him are sights onto which he projects his thoughts of his departed love, and it is here that Petrarch comes to re-enliven Laura through Memory, which, in an odd image, traces an airy physical outline of Laura that contrasts with the concrete objects surrounding him.

While busy Memory still delights to dwell  
On all the charms these bitter tears deplore,  
And with a trembling hand describes too well  
The angel form I shall behold no more!  
To heaven she’s fled! and nought to me remains

---

13 Timothy Henry Reardon explains that Petrarch’s earliest times in Vaucluse imbued the place with a power that would draw him back years later: “In his twenty-eighth year, Petrarch left Avignon for a grand tour through France and Germany. He hoped by this absence to dull the pain of his unfortunate passion. He visited Paris, the Low Countries, and Germany; and on coming back to Italy, he, together with Jacob Colonna, journeyed to Rome, to gratify their enthusiastic taste for its antiquities.

But Avignon and Laura were ever associated in his thoughts. He hastened back, and on his return thither, at the instance of his patron, Cardinal Colonna, he entered the service John XXII., then Pope, who employed him as an envoy to France, to Italian princes, as is said, to England.

Wearying of this, Petrarch sought retirement in Vaucluse (*Val Chiua, Vallis Clausa*) is a beautiful and romantic spot, fourteen miles from Avignon. Its rocks, its picturesque beauty, and the fact that here Petrarch idled away so many hours of lovesick melancholy, have rendered the place, with the petulant little river Sorgue, that boils through the valley, one of the most interesting attractions for literary pilgrimages in the south of Europe” (Reardon 9–10)
But the pale ashes which her urn contains. (9–14)

Whether Smith would have known the biographical details behind Petrarch’s Sonnets 279 and 301 is less important than the possible inference we can make about her attraction to these two works in her earliest poems of 1784. At this initial stage in the development of the *Elegiac Sonnets*, Smith is drawn to Petrarch in moments wherein the land is principally an impetus for memory, moments wherein the land embodies a look into the past rather than grants access to the spirit of another in the present. Earlier on, Smith had abstracted her life of hardship and pain in Sonnet I as “the rugged course I’m doomed to tread” (2), a figurative path that has only a tenuous connection to the landscape at most: The flora out of which the Muse weaves her garlands are wild flowers, hinting at the shared modesty, rusticity, and wildness of her surroundings and her poetry. By contrast, in the sestet of Sonnet XXVI, we see a more meaningful fusion of the landscape with poetic inspiration, as the river becomes an intermediary between kindred poets over time. In these poems, she conceives of these spirits as present to one another through the land, and the spot as sanctified by a history of poetic genius.

With the writing of this sonnet in 1786, Smith’s conception of nature has evolved from one that emphasized memory and the end of the “fond visions” of early life (Sonnet II, 10) to one in which the past invigorates and sanctifies the land in the present. The Arun both mirrors and represents the lives of the wild Otway, and it also suggests that this shared spirit persists through time in a cycle of life and death, renewal and slow deterioration. In the sonnet’s sestet, the image of spring is not used to suggest
happiness and childlike joy, but rather to suggest the passage of time and the persistence of a mournful poetic spirit on the landscape despite external appearances. Elsewhere Smith finds in Spring a reminder of the important difference between nature and life: Human life has no renewal. In the final line of Sonnet II, she meditates with resignation, “Ah! why has happiness -- no second Spring?” Through Otway, the appearance of Spring’s verdure is subverted by the Arun visitors’ insistence on remembering the deceased poet’s sorrows and fate. Smith selects figures that subtly imply the idea that the old and enduring persist amidst the new and transient. She colors her verdant scene with “the first born violets” and hazels, hemmed in by “the oak and birch that fringe thy side” (9). The oak and birch trees contribute to the beauty of the scene, the word “fringe” denoting specifically an ornamental border (OED). Still, the staging of the scene in these final lines emphasizes their towering size and constant presence. The oak in particular seems less a symbol of beauty and more a symbol of age and continuing life, a monolithic fixture that endures despite the seasons.

While the description of Smith’s connection with past poets of the Arun region seems to begin a clearer assertion of her status as poet, the sonnets to the Arun also emphasize the personal, emotional kinship she feels with Otway and Collins, as well as with non-poets whose mournful tempers draw them there. Sonnet XXX is especially devoted to showing how the lonesome river brings together the gloomy poets and the mournful lovers. Perhaps what is just as important as the songs and lays composed here is the common heart that the Arun’s denizens share.

Be the proud Thames of trade’s busy mart!
Arun! to thee will other praise belong;
Dear to the lover’s, and the mourner’s heart,
And ever sacred to the sons of song!

Thy banks romantic hopeless Love shall seek,
Where o’er the rocks the mantling bindwith flaunts;
And sorrow’s drooping form and faded cheek
Choose on thy willow’ shore her lonely haunts!

Banks! which inspired thy Otway’s plaintive strain!
Wilds! -- whose lorn echoes learn’d the deeper tone
Of Collins powerful shell! yet once again
Another poet -- Hayley is thine own!
Thy classic stream anew shall hear a lay,
Bright as its waves, and various as its way!

By starting off with a contrast to “the proud Thames of trade and busy mart” (1) and then describing the “romantic hopeless Love” (5) and the shore’s “lonely haunts” (8), she separates the river from most of society and conveys the solitary nature of its inhabitants. She imagines an odd community for herself, a lineage of writers she calls the “sons of song” (4), whose members she can have only imaginary communion with. More so than Sonnet XXVI, which emphasizes the Arun as a place for the gathering of the kindred spirits of Otway, this sonnet describes the isolation of the region’s lonely lovers and poets, who in the sestet are depicted in communion with the banks, the stream, and its waves, rather than with the spirits of others. And, unlike Sonnet XXVI, Smith here does not focus on the specific sensation that is felt when one communes spiritually with figures from the past. Rather, she seems primarily concerned with preserving the Arun’s reputation and history, linking the legends of Collins, Hayley, and Otway to her beloved landscape.
In Smith’s preoccupation with the endurance of Otway’s tale over time, we can see that to some extent she considered herself to be performing the important task of preserving the literary reputation and history of the Arun River through her poetry. Later in the collection, when this same concern emerges, we see that Smith considers a kind of historical work to be the domain -- even the responsibility -- of great poets. In Sonnet XLVI, “Written at Penshurst, in autumn 1788” she documents the Sidney family’s estate in a ruinous condition that contrasts with the glorious past that Edmund Waller and Ben Jonson recorded previously. In particular, the sestet of this sonnet helps illuminate the reasons for Smith’s great interest in putting into verse all the literary achievements of the Arun River denizens.

Ye towers sublime! deserted now and drear!
Ye woods! deep sighing to the hollow blast,
The musing wanderer loves to linger near,
While History points to all your glories past:
And startling from their haunts the timid deer,
To trace the walks obscured by matted fern,
Which Waller’s soothing lyre were wont to hear,
But where now clamours the discordant hern!
The spoiling hand of Time may overturn
These lofty battlements, and quite deface
The fading canvas whence we love to learn
Sydney’s keen look, and Sacharissa’s grace;
But fame and beauty still defy decay,
Saved by the historic page -- the poet’s tender lay!

As Smith describes how history (4) and natural decay interact with one another to create the haunting and sublime feel of the setting, she more clearly defines how the spirits and glories of the past are preserved despite nature’s obscuring of them. The poem describes the same continuation of an essential spirit, shared by the lovelorn
Waller and the musing wanderer. This spirit is an essential part of the place’s history for Smith. However, whereas in Sonnet XXVI the present-day kindred spirits of Otway were depicted as preservers of history, here the musing wanderer is described more as an inheritor of it, as benefiting from rather than partaking in the writing of history.

Here especially, Smith is concerned with the ways in which a knowledge of history has an emotional effect on our engagement with a setting. The preservation of this knowledge is a concern that emerges earlier in the sonnets to the Arun. Sonnet XXVI, builds upon a feeling of presence and a process of verbal retelling, in which the tale of Otway is handed down through time and becomes a kind of local lore. Two of the subsequent Arun sonnets, XXX and XXXIII, show Smith in the act of cataloguing its great writers so that knowledge of their association with the region finds memorable expression in verse that will preserve their memory there into the future. In Sonnet XLVI’s reference to the historical value of “the poet’s tender lay,” we can see that Smith’s concern for the preservation of history in the sonnets to the Arun was no fleeting interest. Rather, it was the earliest significant expression of a concern that she would continually attend to throughout her career as a poet.

Especially in Sonnet XLVI, Smith wrestles with her conceptions of local histories and how exactly they are preserved. In the first three lines, the wanderer gravitates to the dreary scene ostensibly enjoying the same soothing melancholy amidst nature that Smith describes in numerous other sonnets, but the pleasure he experiences

---

14 In “At Penshurst,” Waller writes of his affection for Sacharissa, the poem’s moniker for Lady Dorothy Sidney.
amidst desolation is distinct from the sensations experienced by Smith’s earlier wandering figures, who tread through lands generally unmarked by man. Here his delight in the hollow, sighing winds is enhanced by the knowledge bequeathed to him by History (4). But history for Smith is an intriguingly multi-faceted concept. We find in this scene the physical ruins on the land, the vestiges of civilization overgrown by the matted ferns. These physical objects have some limited ability to attest to the estate’s past, vaguely pointing to a departed majesty that seems partially the source of the wanderer’s fascination with the location. These constitute a kind of unrecorded and self-evident history. As Smith addresses Penshurst, she says of the winds that howl through the forsaken buildings, “History points to all your glories past” (4). Here she is interested in a kind of subconscious, constantly-ongoing process of reading the past in the forms that surround us, a reading into man’s marks upon the land, a reading that is conducted through emotional reactions to a scene rather than through written words. Here, this process of seeing the past in the present surrounding objects allows the physical constructions at Penshurst to have an emotional effect on visitors, even aside from the knowledge of exact details that are provided by “the historic page” (14). It is the historic page, the more familiar notion of recorded history, to which Smith dedicates herself. She sees the poet-historian as a preservationist with special power. On one hand, time eventually consumes the forsaken towers and rubs out the marks of the

15 Note the rustic and pristine state of the Arun in Sonnet XXX, which is contrasted with the Thames: “Be the proud Thames of trade the busy mart!” (1). In Sonnet XII Smith imagines herself as a mariner alone on a rocky shore who can only barely glimpse “the distant land / From whence no succour comes” (11-12).
painter on “the fading canvas” (11). On the other hand, there is the savior of the past, the historic page, which becomes more specifically a page bearing “the poet’s tender lay” (14).

Smith’s tendency to value these landscapes for the stories of their past residents is the most compelling indication of Petrarch’s continuing influence on her sonnet writing as she was developing her understanding of the emotional comfort and inspirational power that she felt by the Arun River. It is an emotional and creative power that she attributes to the mysterious feeling that her local landscape is haunted by a precious literary history, as well as the lost stories of countless unnamed sufferers. Before being turned into the fanciful verses of Sonnet XXXII, some authentic notion that her beloved Otway still dwelt there reminded her of how Petrarch had confronted his romantic object in the lands of Provence.

There are essential differences between the emotional connection to the past that Smith describes and the connection Petrarch felt with Laura. If we consider Smith’s Sonnet XXXII in relation to earlier translation of Petrarch in Sonnet XV, the difference between the feeling of kinship with another writer and the feeling of romantic love is particularly clear. The soothing feeling of sublime darkness as she feels Otway’s presence is a world apart from the Heavenly feeling Petrarch describes when Laura appears before him near the shaded stream. However, Smith’s poem about her vision of Otway, like Petrarch’s poem about his vision of Laura, depicts an intensely personal encounter, described through language that is loving and whimsical.

When latest Autumn spreads her evening veil,
And the grey mists from these dim waves arise,
I love to listen to the hollow sighs,
Thro’ the half-leafless wood that breathes the gale:
For at such hours the shadowy phantom pale,
Oft seems to fleet before the poet’s eyes;
Strange sounds are heard, and mournful melodies,
As of night-wanderers, who their woes bewail!
Here, by his native stream, at such an hour,
Pity’s own Otway I methinks could meet,
And hear his deep sighs swell the sadden’d wind!
Oh Melancholy! -- such thy magic power,
That to the soul these dreams are often sweet,
And sooth the pensive visionary mind!

By referring to Otway as “Pity’s own” (9), Smith describes a person who is much like her in that he elicits strong feelings of sympathy. However, in describing her feelings about him, she focuses not on compassion for him, but instead on what emotional benefits his story of suffering and delicate constitution provide her. He is an unlikely source of strength and affirmation. She embraces his fragility to the point that the experiences of sensing his sorrows in the air around her produces the magical power of melancholy, which is here, in large part, the comfort that comes from companionship. It is a loving exchange at least in that Smith envisions this moment as one between two individuals who understand and sympathize with one another. In the most familiar terms, the relationship she imagines with Otway is more akin to a deep friendship, but the healing effect of this requires a level of affectionate language that is similar to what we find in Smith’s translations of Petrarch. In these translations, Smith had explored emotions that moved past the physical -- the “angel form” of Laura in Sonnet XV (7) and XVI (12) or the goddess-like shape of Sonnet XIV (9–10) -- to
describe instead her “melting pity” (XIV, 4) and her ability to capture his “faithful heart” (XIII, 14).

It is perhaps the innovative and original atmosphere created by Smith that obscures the poem’s roots in tradition. Sonnet XXXII is rooted in the Petrarchan motif of a consoling vision that flows from a pensive state of mind. This pensiveness in turn is tied to the memories and histories located in the landscape. Smith’s visionary sonnets differ from Petrarch’s primarily in their dark feel, or what is often categorized as Gothicism. This feel is greatly different from Petrarch’s poetry of unrequited loss in important but still relatively superficial ways. The poem focuses on her pursuit of a phantom, an image far different from Laura’s angelic visitations in Petrarch’s works. This is one of Smith’s most unforgettable poems especially because she achieves a strange feeling of comfort amidst darkness, as an apparition produces a soothing melancholy. That soothing darkness of the moment is however perhaps difficult to understand in critical, or for that matter even in human terms. Smith chooses to describe this peculiar feeling in part because of her particular interest in the dark, sublime, and gothic. However, it is doubtful that Smith was so caught up in Gothicism that it would become the primary inspiration for a poem about her beloved Arun.16

16 Smith confesses her distaste for gothic literature twelve years later, in a letter to botanist Dr. James Edward Smith, dated March 15, 1798: “I have not forgotten (being still compelled to write, that my family may live) your hint of introducing botany into a novel. The present rage for gigantic and impossible horrors, which I cannot but consider as a symptom of morbid and vitiated taste, makes me almost doubt whether the simple pleasures afforded by natural objects will not appear vapid to the admirers of spectre novels and cavern adventures” (Stanton, 314).
Smith never depicts this ghostly encounter as fully authentic, yet it is hardly just another playful moment of whimsy either. The poem does seem to be structured upon balancing the imaginative and realistic aspects of the supernatural encounter. She qualifies the tale by confessing some amount of uncertainty: “The shadowy phantom pale, / Oft seems to fleet before the poet’s eyes“ and “Pity’s own I methinks could meet” (10). Smith’s reasons for depicting this general sensation of strangeness about the Arun River banks are difficult to speculate, and a certain level of doubt arises about the authenticity of the feelings of presence so easily taken for granted by the reader. Is the sensation of communion with Otway reducible to the construction of literary melancholy? Or, does Smith render with relative accuracy some feeling of a brush with the supernatural into the sublime and dark tone of the poem?

The answer is not clear, but what Smith does with Petrarch’s visions that is so unique is to recast them in the mold of local literary history. The vision, which grows out of the local landscape, addresses a set of emotions shared by Smith and Petrarch but has unique, non-romantic origins in the case of Smith. Her feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and despair find some believable remedy in the act of communing with fellow suffering writers from the past.

In her translations, Smith had gravitated toward the Petrarch of Vaucluse, who sees in the land memories of his emotional turmoil over Laura. This had been a conception of the land that conformed to her tendency to see the beautiful South Downs as cause for reflection on her own loss of youthful happiness. In comparing the two poets, it is important to avoid relying on a single paradigm for how each understood
such emotional and abstract concepts. Like any invested reader of his sonnets, Smith would have noted moments with differing conceptions of Laura’s relationship to the lands of Provence. The Petrarch who hid away in Vaucluse to escape the places where Laura had once dwelt only voices one aspect of a complex association of the land with the deceased that develops throughout the songbook. Yet it is this Petrarch primarily who seems to have spoken to Smith the most poignantly in her earliest poems about the land. By the writing of the third edition, Smith not only is continuing to re-enliven the sonnet form, she is developing conceptions of the landscape that in large part refer back to a Petrarch who sees his beloved in the natural objects that surround him.
Works Cited


