Sonnets by the Sea: Eighteenth-Century British Women Poets and Surviving Suicidality

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I certify that I have read *Sonnets by the Sea: Eighteenth-Century British Women Poets and Surviving Suicidality* by Katarina Alicea Wagner, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English: Literature at San Francisco State University.

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Abstract

This project is a case study that looks at the subject of suicidal ideation in sonnets set by the sea and written by women during the long eighteenth century. Drawing on eighteenth-century and modern conceptions of suicidality, notions of pain and perception, and theories of land/seascape and emotion, I investigate how women used the space of the sonnet to communicate and contain their self-destructive urges. My thesis places six largely unknown (or at least underrepresented in modern criticism) women poets—Anne Wharton, Mary Robinson, Anne Bannerman, Mrs. B[arbara] Finch, Margaret Holford, and Elizabeth Villa-Real Gooch—in conversation with Charlotte Smith. This juxtaposition highlights a trend of women utilizing the lyric mode to make legible (and publishable) their private pain in the last decades of the century.
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To J.E., L.F., and L.S., who helped me stay—

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**Introduction**

Alexander Pope’s “Epistle II. To a Lady” opens with a generalization of eighteenth-century female identity: “Nothing so true as what you once let Fall, / ‘Most Women have no Characters at all’” (1-2). While Pope’s satire insists on the inherent differences between men and the “fair sex,” it also denies women any discernible self. Its effect, as Felicity Nussbaum describes, “is both to generalize and to negate women’s identity” (“Eighteenth-Century Women’s Autobiographical Commonplaces” 154). Throughout the eighteenth century, women were tasked with fashioning a self that both adheres to society’s image of “Woman” and, in some ways, accurately represents their own complexities—their “characters.” On the one hand, as Nussbaum notes, the contradiction of men labeling women as “vain” and “inconstant,” while simultaneously lauding them for “‘overcoming’ the ‘natural’ tendencies of their sex,” places women’s selfhood at the mercy of the male critical gaze; it also, however, provides women with an opportunity to reflect back to men their own inferiority (154). The looking glass image and the concept of mirroring provides a useful vehicle for understanding this problem of identity women must constantly navigate.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf argues that, throughout history, “women have served…as looking-glasses possessing the magic and the delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (35). This explains the male desire to shrink, to diminish, to negate women, for without an inferior referent, men could not possibly see themselves as superior. As Woolf writes, it also illustrates “the necessity that women so often are to men” (36). Under this logic, the strictures placed on women—how they should think, appear, behave—serve
the male ego, but they also reflect a sense of fragility and anxiety over the threat of diminished dominance. Men use women as a mirror through which to see a magnified version of themselves, but men also criticize women for their vanity—for the metaphoric and physical act of looking at their reflection.

Simone de Beauvoir reminds us that women have “often been compared to water,” partially because water is the mirror into which Narcissus gazes at himself (202). Women are so crucial to men’s prosperity, Beauvoir explains, that “if she did not exist, men would have had to invent her” (203). And, in some ways, men do create women to suit their own needs by fashioning limiting, unrealistic, and entirely self-serving roles for women to fulfill. Men also invent narratives about women: their constitution, their personalities, their weaknesses, their habits; one such narrative is that of narcissism. The looking-glass is often used as a symbol of female vanity, usually carried out to an excess. A poetic portrait of a woman studying her own reflection also speaks metaphorically to the act of introspection; furthermore, the image of a mirror connotes mimesis—the process of recording or depicting reality—for which women are both praised and censured.

Women have long been patronized for their supposed sole capacity to write what they know. Even de Beauvoir makes the case that women must “spend so much negative energy freeing themselves from external constraints that they arriv[e] out of breath at the point where the major masculine writers [are] starting out” (746). Women’s lives have been so constrained, so bereft of freedom (of education, experience, etc.), that they have no hope of “transcending” the everyday, their inner feelings, the world as it appears before them. While women “know how to describe atmosphere and people…and let us share in the secret workings of their souls,” de
Beauvoir explains, their writing “generally lack[s] metaphysical resonance” (746). Women may be “remarkable reporters,” able to accurately describe and document what is before them, but the power of their writing does not leave the realm of the tangible or the personal (de Beauvoir 747).

Just as women are “Educations, more than Nature’s fools,” as Anne Finch remarks in her poem, “The Introduction,” de Beauvoir stresses that “destiny” is not what limits women, but their inexperience (on all counts) that prevents them from achieving literary “greatness” (line 52; 748). Though de Beauvoir is not expounding on the inherent inadequacy of the female imagination, she is placing a value judgment on certain types of literary work. Patricia Meyer Spacks questions the “problem of evaluating feminine accomplishment” she sees in The Second Sex (19). Spacks wonders whether “richness of experience is a prerequisite for the highest literary achievement” and why women’s ability to “aptly describ[e] their own inner life, their experience, their own universe,” as de Beauvoir argues, somehow “adds up to the second-rate” (19).

If women are looked down upon for writing about themselves and the inner workings of their minds because writing about the personal does not elevate women’s writing to the level of masculine writing, why should the goal be to then write like a man? To inhabit a masculine voice and attitude (which shifts dangerously close to meaning “intelligent” and “rational”)? If women are already constrained by patriarchy’s bonds, why submit to the system instead of, for example, taking seriously the profound psychological pain women are more than capable of expressing in verse? To move beyond her function as a looking-glass for men, the woman poet can use the space of the poem to both “mirror” the natural world she sees before her and to “mirror” her own interiority. Somehow the poetry of the personal is often seen by critics as less than—artistically,
creatively, intellectually—but by focusing on it as poetry, by treating versified life writing as we would treat one of Pope’s epistles, we can give women’s work the careful attention it deserves.

“Life writing” is, generally speaking, what it would purport to be—writing that is biographical or autobiographical in nature; writing that records and recounts the experiences of one’s life; writing that focuses on the self, identity, and subjective feeling. Most scholarly work on eighteenth-century “life writing” is dedicated to, perhaps not surprisingly, personal and often private writings: the memoir, the diary, the letter. Building on The Autobiographical Subject (1989), Nussbaum’s formative text on eighteenth-century self-writing, recent critics have investigated how women innovated and contributed to autobiographical writing as a genre. And, while I am interested in these types of life writing—namely the letter and the memoir—and will have occasion to touch on them, my main focus is on poetry as life writing. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine E. Ingrassia collect a number of poems by women under the rubric of “life writing” in their anthology, British Women Poets of the Long Eighteenth Century (2009), which they preface with a reminder of poetry’s inherent “personally revelatory” quality and how it becomes “a source of strategies and examples authorizing and even authenticating women’s representations” (295). In the poems included in their anthology, they see the ways in which women can “create voices” that allow them to “express their most hidden longings and also

1 See Women’s Life Writing, 1700-1850: Gender, Genre, and Authorship, ed. Daniel Cook and Amy Culley (Palgrave, 2012); Caroline Breashears’s Eighteenth-Century Women’s Writing and the ‘Scandalous Memoir’ (Palgrave, 2016); Susan Civale’s Romantic Women's Life Writing : Reputation and Afterlife (2019); Writing Lives in the Eighteenth Century, ed. Tanya M. Caldwell (Bucknell University Press, 2020).

2 Letters will be discussed in my first chapter, and letters and memoirs will be touched on in my second chapter.
opinions that would be socially unacceptable in other forms” (295). The poem becomes a space for introspection and a site of imaginative agency. Not as intimate as an unpublished journal and not as casual as an epistle, a poem traverses the boundaries of public and private and allows women writers the opportunity to understand and express their inner lives—and to do so with complexity and sophistication of craft (technique).

To help illustrate how women poets in the long eighteenth century achieved this sense of interiority, my thesis brings together six largely unknown, or at the very least underrepresented in modern criticism, women poets—one from the beginning of the long eighteenth century and five from the end of the century—in juxtaposition with Charlotte Smith. I selected poems that all meet a very specific set of criteria: all are sonnets, all are written by women, all are set near or in the sea (most are written from the speaker’s perspective, atop a cliff or along the shoreline, looking out at the ocean), all are engaged in a dialogue with what I am calling “suicidal ideation,” and all are explicitly or implicitly written extempore.³ This thesis attempts to show that women poets other than Smith wrote poems that focused on the self, on subjective experience and feeling, and thus each of my chapters will place one or more of Smith’s sonnets side-by-side with one or more sonnets by lesser-known women poets, specifically those by Anne Wharton, Mary Robinson, Anne Bannerman, Mrs. B[arbara] Finch, Margaret Holford, and Elizabeth Villa-Real Gooch.⁴

³ My basic working definition of “suicidal ideation” is straightforward: engaged in thinking about or contemplating the act of suicide.
⁴ Aside from the work of Smith and Robinson, the poems I discuss in this thesis have yet to be published in modern editions. I have, therefore, transcribed the remaining poems from their original sources and included them in an appendix (starting on pg. 102).
We can get a sense of how and where these women poets could, or perhaps should, fit into eighteenth-century literary history, by first looking at how scholars’ views of the traditional “canon” have developed and changed over time. Throughout the past three decades, establishing the place of women poets in the literary historical trajectory has been steadily and increasingly attended to—with the help of Roger Lonsdale’s anthology *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (1989), which added to the eighteenth-century literary corpus the works of not only dozens of previously unknown women poets, but also evidence of a wide array of poetic genres and subjects. Poetry by women is now ubiquitously anthologized, both in collections specifically dedicated to women’s poetry and in scholarly anthologies. Women’s contribution to newer, “non-traditional” conceptions of the eighteenth-century English poetry canon is a frequent concern among scholars.⁵ David Fairer grapples with the accuracy and relevance of perpetuating the “familiar trajectory of the century’s poetry from satire to sensibility, and from the classics towards the ‘pre-romantic’” in eighteenth-century studies (ix). He points to women poets particularly for how their “voices…challenged the old model” of literary history and argues that, to do right by women poets and their contributions to poetic discourse of the time, that “old model” requires “generic reassessment” (x).

Essays in *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (2006), edited by Christine Gerrard, give context to the poems included in Gerrard and Fairer’s annotated anthology of eighteenth-century poetry by paying close attention to its vast array of forms and by continuing 

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to challenge the traditional “landscape” of literary history. Thomas Woodman’s essay in particular interrogates and questions whether categorizing eighteenth-century poetry chronologically—with Augustan poetry dominating the early century and so-called ‘pre-romantic’ poetry taking over by the mid to late century—accurately and fairly describes the trajectory of poetic forms, subjects, and concerns in the century’s poetry. Placing himself in dialogue with other critics, Woodman works through a series of descriptors, most notably the term “preromanticism,” offered by Marshal Brown. Brown’s proposed new term seems, at first, to offer a fair compromise, but, as Woodman notes, Brown still places earlier poets in relation to the Romantics, still evaluates them based on how they are not romantic poets. Ultimately, Woodman never settles on the best terminology to employ, and, instead, concludes that there may not be an “appropriate term or category” for describing what happens to English poetry at mid-century—or at least one that enables us to appreciate the distinct differences and innovations between the key poets of the time (482). Notably, Brown’s “readings” of preromantic poetry are dedicated to an array of exclusively male writers and, while Woodman mentions Charlotte Smith

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8 Brown proposes a revisionary solution to the “pre-romantic” conundrum; rather than abandoning “preromantic” as a term, because it frames the literary period as one inferior to capital-R Romanticism and designates the “preromantic” as a “preliminary state of romanticism,” Brown offers a new definition of the term: a period defined by its nascency, the ways in which it is “not yet romantic” (2).
and Helen Maria Williams in his analysis, he only does so by briefly noting the growing interest in “female poetry of sensibility” (482).

My focus is, of course, on women poets, and as I delve into the poems I have selected, I am not interested in discovering or developing my own all-inclusive classification for their contributions to eighteenth-century literary history. Moreover, I do not think such sweeping generalizations, which are the inevitable consequence of even deliberately fluid labels, are necessary or productive to the work of recovering previously unread women poets and placing them within the context of a more inclusive eighteenth-century poetic timeline. What I am invested in, however, is how women poets—especially those that remain largely absent from the current collected corpus of eighteenth-century women’s poetry—disrupt or challenge our ideas about the arc of poetry throughout the century. And while it is true that the traditional “big six”\footnote{Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Byron, Shelley, and Keats.} Romantic poets (who by no means need to be the standard of comparison) are not all relegated to the nineteenth century, critical discussion of literary periodization/movements seems to be centered around at least attempting to establish where “pre-romanticism” starts, where it ends, and where the Romantic period of Blake and Wordsworth begins.

Several of the poets I discuss in this thesis are or could be considered “Romantic” poets, yet all of them are writing during the eighteenth century (albeit at the end, and with the exception of Wharton). Whether pre-romantic (not quite at the height of Romantic achievement), or preromantic (\textit{not yet} Romantic), Romantic, or something else entirely, these women poets find ways to engage in introspection and give voice to their melancholy while surrounded by the
natural world—a lyric mode often assumed to have originated in the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and, more recently, with Smith. Though Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* are at the heart of my overall argument, and though I firmly support Smith’s accepted status as a Romantic poet, I hope to show that Smith nevertheless also belongs in discussions of eighteenth-century poetry and that she is not the only poet who belongs in discussions of women’s poetic representations of interiority, emotionality, melancholy, and the natural world.

Building on these ideas of an alternative and more complex approach to the century’s poetic output, Paula R. Backscheider’s innovative study of the “forms in which women poets wrote,” *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre* (2008), investigates and documents what she sees as “the beginnings of some distinctive strains that constitute traditions of women’s poetry” (xiii). Rather than providing a “history” of women’s poetry or a “unified, progressive argument,” Backscheider opts for a more dynamic approach; she uses case studies to explore women poets’—specifically those seldom written about—part in the course of an ever-evolving eighteenth-century literary history. She also challenges the narrative that the overall arc of eighteenth-century poetry can or should be defined in relation to traditional “masculine” forms of satire, rhetoric, and wit. It is true that women poets were undoubtedly, and masterfully, engaging in satiric discourse, but I want to highlight the unique poetic paths women took (i.e., the lyric, for my purposes) to focus on their own subjectivity. Backscheider’s approach to women’s poetry and recovery work exemplifies the kind of thinking I want to do in relation to the poets in my thesis—which is to say, I will not be offering a comprehensive analysis of women’s poetic contributions to the last two decades of the eighteenth century. To this end, it may be helpful to first note what this thesis is *not*.
This is not an influence study, nor is it an evaluation of poetic quality or merit. It is also not an attempt to make any kind of generalizations about all of women’s poetry and life writing on suicidal ideation. Instead, this thesis is essentially a case study—one that looks closely at the recurrence of an incredibly specific type of poem with an equally specific subject matter and setting. Given the constraints of the genre in which I am writing, it would be impossible, for example, to discuss every poem written by a woman that features suicidal ideation. What is possible, though, is a move toward the granular. Focusing on extensive close readings of the sonnets I have collected will allow me to put the poems into conversation with one another, which will, in turn, help me situate these seaside sonnets in a larger literary historical context.

Attending to each poem’s lyric voice, the subjective “I” concerned with communicating intimate experiences of mental and physical pain, will help illuminate how these women poets navigated the late-century literary and cultural landscape, while simultaneously traversing both their own psychological terrains and their poems’ formal topographies. As women writing in the eighteenth century, and writing about controversial subject matter, these poets were careful and deliberate in translating their thoughts and feelings onto the printed page. In order to maintain the appropriate amount of sensibility and respectability required to appeal to the typical eighteenth-century reader, these poets surely worked to modulate the voice of their self-destructive tendencies in such a way that allowed them to authentically communicate the workings of their minds, while still affording them enough restraint to express their private selves publicly in print.

The impulse to comprehend and communicate one’s mental state is of particular relevance and importance to the experience of pain and illness, both psychological and physical. Investigating the relationship between illness and language is at the heart of my thinking about
these poems. In her pivotal *On Being Ill*, Virginia Woolf notes the “poverty of language” in describing “illness in literature” (6). Physical illness is Woolf’s primary, or overt, concern; the essay, however, stresses how mental and physical symptoms of illness are inextricably bound. By relying on a series of seemingly unrelated yet incredibly distinct images, Woolf attempts to get at the “essence” of illness. The essay itself is a multi-genre experiment—one that is “not manifesto, or literary criticism, or feminist argument, or meditation on life, or fiction, or biography or history or autobiography,” as Hermione Lee writes in her introduction to the text, but a combination of all of the above (xxv). Its kaleidoscopic nature speaks to the impenetrability of illness. how it eludes language (description), understanding, and, often, effective care or cure. Anne Finch shared these same sentiments in her 1713 poem “The Spleen,” an at least partially autobiographical “Pindaric ode” about her experience with depression, which disregards a coherent structure, rhyme scheme, or meter. Finch, too, expresses the mystifying quality of her illness by likening the manifestation of her melancholy to “Proteus,” noting its ever-fluctuating “perplexing form” (2, 5). Both Woolf and Finch, in their own ways, stress the difficulty in understanding and communicating the lived experience of “illness” (here broadly defined), but it is also important to note that Woolf’s essay is teeming with simple and complex images, with straightforward and obfuscat ing metaphors. Despite the inadequacy of language surrounding illness, artists are compelled to use the poetic, the metaphoric, to both express and work through the experience of illness. To push this idea further, we can think of illness in relation to pain, as they both often come hand in hand.

Through her meditation on pain, Elaine Scarry repeatedly stresses the singularity of physical pain—ranging from chronic pain to torture—which she clearly differentiates from “all
our other interior states,” because such states (e.g., hunger or desire) are thought of in relation to someone or something else. “...we do not simply ‘have feelings,’” she writes, “but have feelings for somebody” (5). Physical pain, on the other hand, “has no referential content” (Scarry 5).

While I am not interested in comparing different states or degrees of pain, and I do not intend to either lessen the felt experience of physical pain or to overstate the intensity of psychological pain, I do see an opening in the Scarryean pain/imagination schema through which to (perhaps too boldly) attach my own conception of mental pain. I would assert that the kind of psychological “pain” experienced in depression, and particularly in instances of suicidal ideation, functions similarly. Both can exist seemingly without cause (as in without cogent etiology and without a legible, sustained source/output of pain), and both pain experiences are also largely “invisible” to others, only “knowable” to the person in pain. And while the mental pain associated with depression does not “actively destroy” language, as Scarry writes of physical pain like torture, it does infect one’s entire perceptive processes. Acute suicidality carries this to the extreme, where one’s consciousness and impulse toward self-preservation is usurped by the desire to die. Every passing minute is seen as the continuance of suffering.

Though mental pain does not resist language to the same degree as physical suffering, it can nevertheless be categorized by its “unsharability;” at the same time, we must also contend that pain’s very nature—its “aversiveness”—compels us to utilize the imaginative, the poetic, the metaphoric, as a way in to the impenetrable depths of the pain experience (Scarry 4). This, I would argue, is dually true of emotions and psychological suffering. To Scarry, “pain and the imagination are each other’s missing intentional counterpart” (169); pain is a state “wholly without objects,” while imagination is “the only state that is wholly its objects” (162). The two
are connected by the total inversion of their individual states, (i.e., pain resists language and representation, while imagination is a force through which that fractured existence might hope to be repaired or reconstituted). When fully realized, this concept speaks to the power of the imagination to push back against the pain in our lives, but it also speaks to the ways in which the “bodymind” and imagination work together to shape, comprehend, and manage multiple forms of pain.11

Art, to Susanne K. Langer, is “the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling” (40). The way Scarry defines imagination as “wholly objects” and pain as “wholly without objects” also augments Langer’s ideas about artistic creations, as the poet uses images to represent pain. Langer’s focus is on the act of creating: not simply the created product—the “artifact”—but the process through which the artist utilizes their “technical skill” to make a work imbued with a “symbol of sentience” (40). Scarry expands on these ideas by meditating on the goal of imaginative creation, specifically for the creator. The goal of imaginative creation is more than the finished product; rather the poet, for example, produces a poem as a means of altering human sentience, to make their bodily experience less averse. As the inverse of pain, the imagination works as a mechanism to ameliorate suffering. For the suicidal poet, this is a potentially life-saving tool.

11 The term “bodymind” is important in disability studies. Margaret Price was among the first to apply it to her work on mental and physical disability. In “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” Price writes that “bodymind is a term [she] picked up…while reading in trauma studies” [see Babette Rothschild’s The Body Remembers (200)] (2). She summarizes the bodymind approach: “...because mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other—that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two—it makes more sense to refer to them together, in a single term” (2).
To investigate how the poems of Smith, Wharton, Robinson, Bannerman, B[arbara] Finch, Holford, and Gooch operate as both expressions of emotional pain and a means of survival, I want to ask of them questions proposed by Langer on how to approach a poem: “What has the poet made, and how did [s]he make it?” Through a mix of close-reading, providing historical context, and drawing on secondary sources on landscape, melancholy, and suicidality I aim for a better understanding of what these poems are doing and what that means for these women poets in the eighteenth century and their place in literary history. Though all the poems discussed in my thesis share the same fundamental elements—kind and form (lyric and sonnet), content (suicidal ideation and pain), and setting (land/seascape)—I will be organizing my analysis in a way that allows me to emphasize each of those elements, separately, in a few key poems. And while I will undoubtedly have opportunity to discuss suicidal ideation in relation to every poem, dedicating each chapter to a different facet of my overall argument enables me to delve deeply into my research on poetic form/genre, nature and emotion, and both eighteenth-century and modern conceptions of suicidality. This will, I hope, show that Smith was not the only poet using the lyric mode to grapple with the themes of despair, suicidal ideation, and the natural world; in fact, the poems I have collected engage with the subjects of Smith’s poems in interesting ways and deserve to be read in conversation with hers.
Chapter One

Tempests of Mood and Meter: The Shipwreck as Melancholy’s Mirror in Smith and Wharton

While Charlotte Smith wrote a great deal of lyric poetry toward the end of the eighteenth century, she certainly was not the first to engage in the kind of literary introspection we see in her *Elegiac Sonnets*, nor was she the first to write candidly about the subjects of melancholy and suicidal ideation. Throughout the eighteenth century women found ways to express their psychological pain on the page. Anne Finch is the woman poet most associated with this kind of personal poetry, and she is often included in modern critical discussions of melancholy poetry. Finch undoubtedly paved the way for future women poets to write honestly about their depression, but Finch was not the only female poet of the eighteenth century to use the lyric “I.” Anne Wharton, writing almost a century before Charlotte Smith, also wrote intimately about her despair, yet her poetry is virtually absent from modern criticism. As with the rest of the poets in this thesis, this chapter will juxtapose Wharton’s work with Smith’s to show that

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12 See Anne Finch’s “The Spleen,” Elizabeth Carter’s “Ode to Melancholy,” Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s “Letter,” Hester Mulso Chapone’s “My Own Epitaph,” Mary Masters’s “Maria in Affliction,” Jane Pilkington’s “An Invocation to Sleep,” and Charlotte Lennox’s “An Ode to Sleep.”
13 In *A Room of One’s Own* Virginia Woolf highlights the importance of female literary patronage: “Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter—the valiant old woman who tied a bell to her bedstead in order that she might wake early and learn Greek. All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is, most scandalously but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds” (62). Though she isn’t mentioned here, Woolf writes about Finch’s “melancholy” poetry and her “great wisdom” as a literary predecessor, and it seems to me that the poets in this thesis should have “laid a wreath upon” Finch’s grave (71).
Wharton can and should be studied alongside a “recovered” poet like Smith; even though Wharton was writing over a decade earlier, her poetic practices are not unlike Smith’s.

Charlotte Smith’s “Sonnet XII. Written on the sea shore.—October, 1784” pairs descriptions of nature with expressions of psychological pain as a way of utilizing the natural setting—the seashore and brewing storm—to mirror the speaker’s solitary feelings. The sonnet begins by painting a picture for the reader by describing the “rocky” shore on which the speaker sits (1). Atop “some rude fragment,” the speaker can see the “billows break” against a “fractured cliff” (1-2). The words “fragment” and “fractured” connote a sense of disjointedness, brokenness, and chaos. Before the speaker has even mentioned her personal feelings, an overarching sense of emotional disruption and loneliness inhabits the poem through the description of the setting. There is also a quality of wild abandon. The fragment is “rude,” which chiefly denotes ruggedness in this context, but it also implies violence and harshness, something “marked by unkind or severe treatment of people or living things” (OED). The “fractured cliff” withstands harsh treatment from the stormy waves, and the speaker, just as the “poor mariner” she imagines, endures uncompromising adversity dealt by “Fate” (2, 10, 9). The speaker aligns herself and her suffering with the worn, dilapidated seaside; not only is the rugged, unforgiving environment a fitting place for her to contemplate her equally frayed mental state, but it also provides her with a complementary setting within which to play out her self-destructive longings.

14 Cited from The Poems of Charlotte Smith, ed. Stuart Curran (1993). Subsequent references to Smith’s poems are from the same source and will be cited parenthetically by line number.
15 Smith’s imagery here anticipates William Cowper’s “The Castaway” (1799).
As a way of building up to her most explicit statement of suicidal ideation, the speaker observes the turbulent scene before her:

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. (5-8)

The ominous “dark waves” create a threatening, volatile atmosphere fit for reflections of emotional turmoil. Whereas the blustering winds are audibly “howling” before the speaker, she is wailing in pain internally, silently; the poem itself becomes, then, an exercise in verbal lamentation, a way for Smith to express, through her speaker, distress in verse. The speaker’s woe is externalized in descriptions of the swirling sea, yet the sonnet as a whole also functions as a linguistic space to hold, to contain, intimate psychological suffering. Rather than wanting to retreat from the “troubled sea” like the sea-bird, the speaker finds a certain comfort amidst the “wild gloomy scene.” She feels seen, understood, by her somber surroundings, and they parallel her already melancholy psyche. By first giving the reader an exposition of both the natural environment and the speaker’s mental state, Smith communicates the necessary connection between the storm and the speaker; it is both witnessing a scene so tumultuous and then writing about such a scene that provides the speaker with an appropriate space for expressing her feelings and longings for death.

In the last stanza, the speaker admits how lost, trapped, and hopeless she feels as she compares herself to a solitary “poor mariner,” “cast on a rock” (lines 10-11). Continuing with maritime diction, the speaker describes herself as “already shipwreck’d by the storms of Fate”
The sense of despair is echoed by the word “already.” The speaker, previously stranded, is now currently marooned by her life’s circumstances. Deborah Kennedy asserts that the cause of the speaker’s despair is due to circumstance, as Smith “direct[s] attention to external rather than internal factors, implying that it is the things in the world that cause a woman to feel melancholic” (43). In her current state, the speaker sees no hope for herself and foresees no relief as she looks off into the future, even as the mariner “sees the distant land,” and finds no aid or rescue (11). Using the imagined sailor as a vehicle for the speaker’s own dejection, Smith concludes, “Faint and more faint are heard his feeble cries, / ‘Till in the rising tide the exhausted sufferer dies” (13-14). The distant whisper of his “feeble cries” stands in direct contrast with the raucous screaming of the sea-bird and the resounding clamor of the wind in the previous stanzas. Whereas the descriptions of the tempest are visceral, immediate, and unavoidable, the wails of the sailor are increasingly remote, so much so that he is ultimately silenced completely.

Overtaken by the surging surf, he is consumed by exhaustion, unable to withstand the forces working against him. Like the mariner’s “feeble cries,” the speaker too may feel that her attempts at voicing her pain are weak and ineffective, that articulating her anguish will only result in irresolvable fatigue. Christina Cognevich argues that Smith’s sonnets “unexpectedly privilege silence over song” (2). Though Smith is associated with poetry of “sensibility”—a poetic mode that favors immediacy of emotion—her speakers are often at a loss for both words and hope. As Smith attempts, repeatedly throughout *Elegiac Sonnets*, to “express a complicated grief,” she is pushed toward “silence as a form of non-sensual expression” (Cognevich 3). In “Written on the sea shore,” the speaker is left with only the imagined traces of another’s cries and her own wish for the eternal silence of the grave.
However, because only the sailor dies at the end of the poem—notably not the speaker—a sense of vacillation and wavering remains. While many of the poems in Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* include discussions of desires for death, it is important to note that neither death nor suicide ever occur for the speaker. In reading Smith, Eric Parisot notes that “the nuanced distinction drawn in the *Sonnets* between a longing for death and oblivion, and the poetic expression of suicidal intent” is crucial (661). This poetic and psychological strategy of stopping short of death is something we will see in all the poems included in this thesis. Even when the speakers share their suicidal thoughts, those thoughts are confined to the space of the sonnet and they do not move beyond the metaphoric. Rather than imagining herself dying “in the rising tide,” the speaker pictures a drowned “poor mariner” in the poem’s final line. True of all the poems in this study, there is a conscious effort to, in some way, distance the speaker (and potentially the poet) from the reality of a death by suicide. The speaker is still working out her “yearning for death,” a longing that “remains inert through the *Sonnets*” (Parisot 662). In *Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide*, psychiatrist Kay Redfield Jamison writes, “Often, people want both to live and to die; ambivalence saturates the suicidal act” (39). With the absence of any implied action or follow through, “Sonnet XII” functions as a way of linguistically flirting with death by experimenting with its feeling and finality. Within the safety of her sonnet’s stanzas, Smith is free to express her desire for the release of death while simultaneously maintaining an implicit attitude of hesitation.

This state of flux is represented through the poem’s stylistic features: its grammatical structures, its rhyme scheme, its sound. “Sonnet XII” is a typical Shakespearean sonnet in terms of rhyme scheme, although its separate stanzas are a formal deviation. Throughout most of the
poem, the speaker’s swaying ruminations about death, much like undulations of the waves Smith writes about, are mirrored by similar shifts that resist uniformity and subvert expectation. The poem’s first line, “On some rude fragment of the rocky shore,” is an example of alliterative chiasmus as the “some” and “rude” are followed by a repetition of initial consonants, but in reverse order: “rocky” and “shore.” Line 2 aligns “fractured” with “fragment” of the previous line (that is, both “f” words are the fourth word in the line), but the alliteration occurs at the end of the line, with “billows break” (2). In the third line, the alliteration comes both at the beginning and middle of the line: “musing, my” and “solitary seat.” Then in the final line of the stanza, alliteration is absent, while the “s” and “r” initial consonants present in line 1 reappear (“solemn roar”), which allows the stanza to end where it began. By changing the placement of the alliteration from line to line, Smith is both echoing the ebb and flow of the sea and reinforcing the overall ambivalence of the speaker. Nature—including the waves, the weather, the sea-worn cliffs—is in flux; so too are the speaker’s reflections, as she seriously contemplates death and her current mental state in relation to the scene around her. She, however, exclusively engages in contemplation (rather than action).

The second stanza follows a similar fluctuating pattern. The consonant repetition occurs in the middle of line 5 (“waves” and “winds”), at the beginning and end of lines 6 (“screaming sea-bird” and “sea”) and 8 (“suits” and “soul”), yet is absent from line 7. The verbal units created by the alliteration (e.g., “waves the winds” and “screaming sea-bird quits the troubled sea”) are both compressed and expanded throughout the stanza, again mimicking the rise and fall of waves but also simulating the process of breathing: inhaling (shorter unit of “waves the winds”) and exhaling (longer unit of “suits the mournful temper of my soul”). Smith’s sonnet is about the
very process of life, of what it looks, sounds, and feels like to be alive and how the speaker copes with the burden of a painful, forlorn existence. Thinking of the repetition in this way, the lack of alliteration in line 7 could be seen as a held breath, a pause, a test, precisely as the speaker is considering the appeal of the volatile (and, ultimately, deadly) environment—at least for the sailor she imagines. This pause can also be thought of as a moment of silence: a “poetical equivalent of…the stop, or the blank measure” (Cognevich 4). The intermingled absences throughout the poem mirror the speaker’s anesthetized affect and the appeal she finds in the afterlife.

Comparatively, line 11 of the final stanza—“Cast on a rock; who sees the distant land”—contains no alliteration and functions as another pause, in this case illustrated by the use of a semicolon. While there is a dash in the middle of the following line, all other punctuation occurs at the end of lines throughout the poem (with the exception of commas); the semicolon here thus highlights the deliberateness of Smith’s syntax in the last stanza. The first four lines written naturally in prose might read, “Already shipwreck’d by the storms of Fate, like the poor mariner, methinks, I stand, who, cast on a rock, sees the distant land from whence…,” which would relegate “cast on a rock” to an appositive. Smith’s choice, however, to separate “cast on a rock” and “who sees the distant land” adds gravity to both descriptions of the mariner. The sailor’s isolation and seemingly forced exile and abandonment is equally as important as the hopelessness with which he gazes out at the land. For the speaker, too, her sense of solitary remove, forced upon her by her “Fate,” is a crucial element of her demoralization. As a line that contains the main causes of the speaker’s longing for death, it makes sense that it would include both a significant syntactical shift and a notable absence of consonant repetition; it is in this final
stanza that the speaker is fully working out her desire for death and the language and form of poetry itself is a key component of that mental exercise.

In constructing a poetic surrogate to act out the speaker’s death-wish, Smith gives language and poetic space to suicidal ideation. Furthermore, Smith’s portrayal of both melancholy and suicidal ideation has gender implications as well. Elizabeth Dolan reminds us that, by the late eighteenth century, melancholia began to be associated with “excessive rationality,” and male poets of the time “were able to move easily between the medical definition and the literary tradition of melancholia because both were symptomatic of rationality and intelligence for men” (238). Women who chose to write about melancholy, on the other hand, “ran the risk of being culturally disempowered by medical definitions of women’s nervous illnesses or by an association with unfeminine reason” (Dolan 238). To Kennedy, the “strength” of Smith’s speaker comes through in the “liberating image of a woman in nature, thinking about her life, even though those thoughts are on her unhappiness” (45). Her choice to participate in intense self-reflection and self-expression by writing poetry rather than engaging in self-destructive behavior demonstrates mental stability and an awareness of the severity of her own melancholy and dissatisfaction, coupled with a rational understanding of the finality of death.

Smith’s dedication to write as a depressed woman and to write on the subject of female depression also works against perceptions of female intellectual ineptitude and mental instability thought to be brought on by melancholy or hysteria. In the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, sixteenth-century scholar Robert Burton, documents all sorts of causes and symptoms of melancholy.16

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16 *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was a widely-read treatise on melancholy that documents the disease’s symptoms, causes, and cures. It was originally published in 1621 and expanded on and revised for a total
Discussing symptoms of “Womens[sic] Melancholy” in particular, Burton writes that “many of them cannot tell how to expresse themselves in wordes, or how it holds them,...you cannot understand them, or well tell what to make of their sayings” (415). “So farre gone sometimes, so stupified and distracted,” he continuous, “they think themselves bewitched” (415). Burton explains that both men and women suffer from the disease, but he maintains that women, unlike men, “display none of the genius associated with it” (Dolan 238). “Written on the sea shore,” through its complex stylistic form and candid explication of feeling, refutes Burton’s assertion about women’s failure to articulate their melancholic mental landscape; instead, the sonnet is a notable example of Smith’s poetic capability. She makes her speaker’s depression intelligible by giving it space on the page.

Deborah Hedges suggests that “poetry is the literary form that is most like therapy,” in part because both the poem and the therapeutic relationship “give space and the right climate for deeper levels of meaning to be explored” (6). And expressing and uncovering those deeper levels in a “safe setting” (that is, the poem or the therapeutic relationship) can lead to catharsis (Hedges 7). Women poets like Smith utilized the act of writing poetry as a vehicle for emotional catharsis and used the landscape of the poem as a vessel for psychological suffering. As a serious poetic meditation on depression and death, “Sonnet XII” deliberately takes into account the psychologically violent and physically dangerous effects of suicidal depression, but Smith uses the poem itself as an antidote to a potential death by suicide. The speaker does not express intent

of eight seventeenth-century editions. The text quoted here is from the 1989 Clarendon Edition (Oxford UP), which uses the 1632 version of Anatomy as its copy-text.
to hasten her own death by the end of the poem having used the process of writing the poem as a sort of exorcism. Poetic imagination becomes a means of survival.

Anne Wharton engages in a similar poetic exercise of giving language and space to depression and suicidal thoughts as a mode of self-preservation. Though Wharton’s poetic output was relatively small, I would argue that her life writing on melancholy and suicidal ideation deserves to be discussed alongside the likes of Charlotte Smith. There are twenty-four known Wharton poems, only one of which was published during her lifetime.\(^{17}\) Wharton wrote elegies, verse epistles, and classical/religious paraphrases. The bulk of her work, however, consists of meditative occasional poems in which she grapples with illness, depression, despair, and death.\(^{18}\) Wharton was just twenty-six when she died, and from age thirteen on she had been plagued by recurring physical illnesses that left her in immense physical pain.

In “On the Storm between Gravesend and Diepe; Made at That Time” Wharton engages in life writing to calm the psychological tempest raging in her mind.\(^{19}\) “On the Storm,” like Smith’s “Sonnet XII,” recounts a chaotic scene in nature with the speaker relating to the outside environment as a means to meditate on her suffering. From the first two lines, Wharton illustrates the tumultuous and precarious scene: “When the Tempestuous Sea did foam and roar, /
Tossing the Bark from the long-wish’d for Shore” (lines 1-2). Sensual details like “foam” and “roar” create an intimidating image for the reader of standing on a small sailboat, surrounded by the swirling surf, and hearing only the resounding rumble of the waves (much like the sea’s “deep and solemn roar” and the wind’s “tempestuous howl” in Smith’s sonnet). The following four lines further illuminate this worldview. Wharton compares the sea’s “false affected fondness” to the “Love of Impious men, where e’re / Their cruel Kindness lights, ‘tis to ensnare” (3, 5-6). The water, with its passionate uproar, seems to be “fond” of the boat and its passengers as the waves reach out and push the boat further and further away from land. Such seeming adoration, however, is misleading; just as “kindness” received from a wicked man is inherently artificial and manipulative, the sea has an antagonistic desire to “keep,” to consume the ship and its mates. Wharton’s complex personification of the sea can be read as a representation of the speaker’s feelings: cast out, made to suffer mentally and physically, and in a constant battle to stay afloat amidst the psychological storm intent on defeating her.

As the poem continues, however, it becomes clear that the speaker’s reaction to the perilous storm is seemingly counterintuitive. Similar to how the storm in Smith’s poem matches her speaker’s current mental state, Wharton’s speaker feels her mind “toss’d in tedious Storms of Troubled Thought” amidst the waves violently thrashing around her (7). Yet, although she finds herself in a treacherous situation, the speaker remains “careless of the Waves the Ocean brought” (8). Because her “Anchor Hope [is] lost, and too too near / On either hand [are] Rocks of sad Despair,” the threat of living – of having to endure such intense, imminent sorrow – outweighs her fear of death. The image of hope as an anchor fittingly complements the poem’s nautical theme, but it also epitomizes the speaker’s profound despondency. Anchors provide a sense of
control and a sense of being controlled. If something is anchored to the ground, it is restricted and confined, but that restriction is not meant to be oppressive; the restraint is, instead, a precaution, a safety measure, taken to keep whatever is being anchored from drifting away, from wandering precariously close to destruction. To those suffering from illness, hope functions as a guide through wearisome circumstances, a force that stops people like Wharton from succumbing to depression and despair. When depression intensifies, though, suicide presents itself as a solution. The speaker admits that “Mistaken seamen prais’d [her] fearless Mind, / Which, sunk in Seas of Grief, could dare the Wind” (11-12). Members of the crew confuse the speaker’s apparent composure in the face of danger with bravery, seeing her as someone unaffected and not easily rattled. In reality, however, the speaker’s behavior is a result of her looming self-destructive impulses. She is not “braving” the wind because of some inherent courage; she is dangerously “daring” the wind, confidently confronting it, because she no longer cares if she lives or dies. Her ambivalence toward life is reminiscent of the wavering of Smith’s speaker.

While Smith’s speaker meditates on death, she never initiates any suicidal behavior. Wharton’s speaker, though not actively pursuing death, is not actively preserving life either. The state of her mind, already “sunk” in despair, appears compromised. Depression infects and decays the mind. As Jamison claims, “The quickness and flexibility of a well mind, a belief or hope that things will eventually sort themselves out – these are the resources lost to a person when the brain is ill” (92). An unhealthy mind, steeped in misery and saturated with despair, invites destruction. It longs for, seeks out, or at least does not shy away from, situations detrimental to survival. In another of Smith’s sonnets, “On passing over a dreary tract of country,
and near the ruins of a deserted chapel, during a tempest,” the speaker remarks how the “Earth
seems to shudder at the storm aghast,” but then goes on to assert that “(...) only beings as forlorn
as I, / Court the chill horrors of the howling blast” (2-4). Much like “Sonnet XII” the speaker
finds communion among nature in the storm, but here her pursuit of the raging winds, her choice
to purposefully place herself among the violent weather, is explicitly linked to her “forlornness.”
The poem ends with the speaker admitting that “the deepest shade” is not as “Black as [her] fate,
or cold as [her] despair” (13-14). With echoes of Finch’s “Spleen,” Smith illustrates the depth of
the speaker’s depression– the weight it carries, how far-reaching its effects feel. Deciding to
“court the chill horrors,” then, is a symptom of the severity of the speaker’s misery.

To a healthy person, deliberately welcoming risk might appear absurd or even deranged,
but to a depressed individual, courting death and even choosing to pursue it could not be more
rational. Existential psychologist Rollo May is known for characterizing depression as “the
inability to construct a future,” and one could arguably embellish that to include “a future
deemed bearable” (243). Faced with current “Storms of troubled Thought,” the idea of having to
endure pain indefinitely seems intolerable and futile (line 7). Wharton’s speaker believes that
“tempestuous life is dread and harm,” yet “Approaching Death [has] not unpleasing Form” (13-
14). Specifically “tempestuous life” – life filled with upheaval, struggle, and grief – generates
“dread” and “harm.” Just as Smith’s speaker conceives of her mental suffering in relation to her
life’s circumstances, Wharton’s speaker sees her pain arising from the chaos of her life.
Paradoxically, life is seen as harmful, while the act of nearing death is entirely gratifying. Again,
amid the throes of suicidal depression, the speaker is more intimidated by the prospect of
survival than she is of potential death. Characterizing depression, Solomon writes, “The opposite
of depression isn’t happiness but vitality” (437). What depression involves, then, is an inability to look at one’s life as worth living and, instead, to see psychological anguish as something endurable. We can think of Wharton’s speaker as bereft of vitality, as she appears fond of death and averse to life, but that begs the question: what is sustaining the speaker, or even Wharton herself? What might Wharton have gained in writing a personal poem clearly concerned with depression and the looming threat of death?

Thinking back to how “Sonnet XII” provides Smith with safe space to act out her death-wish without having to physically engage in any self-destructive behavior, Wharton’s “On the Storm” arguably serves a corresponding purpose. In the way that Smith might have wanted to evade suicide, in part, because of the damage it could do to her literary reputation, Wharton may have been concerned about suicide because of the religious implications of an “unnatural” death. In *Sleepless Souls*, Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy show how perceptions of suicide changed throughout early modern England, particularly in the eighteenth century, and, while it was eventually seen as a result of insanity rather than a sinful act, suicide was still deeply demonized at the end of the seventeenth century. At the time Wharton was writing, “self-murderers” were not only “denied Christian burials,” but their bodies “were interred profanely” (MacDonald and Murphy 15). Often the corpses of those who died by suicide were “carried…to a crossroads and thr[own]…naked into a pit,” after which a “wooden stake was hammered through the body, pinioning it in the grave” (MacDonald and Murphy 15). Though it is impossible to know the intricacies of Wharton’s religious beliefs, we can extrapolate a general idea from her poems.
Wharton’s longest poems are her four biblical paraphrases, and most of her other poems contain at least some form of religious imagery. One poem in particular, “Thoughts occasion’d by her Retirement into the Country,” suggests that Wharton was simultaneously struggling with a longing to end her own life and her commitment to God.  

“Thoughts” is a somewhat unique poem—a single stanza of 89 lines, mostly in heroic couplets with the occasional triplet—in which Wharton essentially works out her complicated thoughts about life, death, and faith. She starts the poem with what I would characterize as a direct statement of suicidal ideation: “All fly the unhappy & I all would fly / Knew I but where to goe, or how to dye” (1-2). This is only the beginning of the speaker’s longing for escape, from life, from her mortal body, from her suffering. Her “fatal hopes decay,” and even though she wishes she could die, she finds she “long must grieve” (34, 37). She even asks, “Ah for what crimes am I condemn’d to live / Els[e] I might wander through unbounded Ayre” (38-39). “Unbounded Ayre” is no doubt a reference to Heaven—where she can finally be freed from her mortal sorrows—but this image of divine freedom is challenged by a description of a more earthly reality.

After spending several lines praising the “Eternall’s wisdom,” the speaker concludes that both her poetry and her soul are hopelessly earthbound (49). She “Disdaines that clay which keeps her flight behind”—scorns her human body that keeps her tied to earth instead of ascending to Heaven—but she also adds that “A Soul buried in Earth can never fly” (69, 66). If

20 See Appendix pg. 108. An unattributed version of “Thoughts occasion’d by…” was printed in A New Miscellany of Original Poems (1701) by Charles Gildon with the title “The Retirement,” but it differs so drastically from the earlier manuscript version that it appears Gildon added his own lines and changed some of Wharton’s. My copy-text is the original Holkham Hall manuscript (MS 691). The MS is undated, unpagedinated, and unfoliated, but, as Greer notes, it “is the most important single source for poems by Anne Wharton” (111).
we think about the kind of burial practices that were afforded to suicides, bodies “pinion[ed] to the ground” by wooden stakes, perhaps Wharton is concerned for the fate of her soul. A soul buried in earth could mean a soul condemned to earth for eternity, without the chance of resurrection that a Christian burial (and a death other than suicide) would provide. The image of a body fixed to the ground is the physical representation of someone chained to earth (or, alternatively, hell) after choosing suicide. Though Wharton is open about her suicidal ideation throughout the poem, it seems she is all too aware of the potential consequences if she were to act on her self-destructive thoughts. By the end of the poem, she ultimately decides to “Neither delay [her] death nor hasten it” (87). The speaker realizes that it is impossible for her to know what the afterlife holds, or how or when she will die, because God’s will is, of course, a mystery. Her only choice is to trust in God, for, she maintains, “All will be guided right when by his will” (88). “On the Storm,” however, portrays more acute suicidality and does not offer the same explicit resolution that we see in “Thoughts.”

The fact that both poems were supposedly written in real time, while Smith was by the sea, while Wharton was on a boat in a storm, speaks to their emotional and dramatic immediacy. It also highlights the deep personal connection between poet and poem. While it would be an oversimplification to say Wharton’s poem is entirely autobiographical, it is still worthwhile to look at her as a melancholic woman poet like Smith, as Wharton clearly struggled with emotional pain and used the act of writing to lessen her psychological heft. In writing occasional verse like “On the Storm,” Wharton is able to give language to despair and suicidal ideation through documenting her private, interior feelings. Her focus on the self, her representation of interiority, also challenges perceptions of the removed, intellectual, didactic writing typically
associated with early eighteenth-century poets. In *Writing Illness and Identity in Seventeenth-Century Britain*, David Thorley describes verse writing on illness as a specific form of life writing, a way for poets to “regulate their humours” (181). He sees Wharton as “do[ing] exactly that” as she grapples with sickness in her poetry (181). Understanding poetry writing as a process of not only self-expression but also of self-regulation helps explain the benefit of giving creative space to dark intrusive thoughts and feelings. Tasked with finding a way to resist the urge to self-destruct, poetry becomes a place to keep difficult emotions and painful urges with room to unload, unpack, and analyze depression.

“On the Storm” ends with the statement “Approaching Death appeases ev’ry Storm” (15). The threat of the speaker’s unwanted life is mollified by the prospect of death. There is a sense of relief in staring down death, in contemplating the end of mental and physical pain that death can provide. The poem, then, serves as a vessel, a place for Wharton to store her desire for death, perhaps importantly because she chooses *not* to act on her impulses. Solomon notes, “There are fine but important distinctions between wanting to be dead, wanting to die, and wanting to kill yourself. (...) Suicide is not the result of passivity; it is the result of an action taken” (238). In Wharton’s poem, however, her verb choice—approaching—could imply a desire for some form of action, of wanting to die, of wanting the bodily experience of being “freed from the affliction of consciousness” (Solomon 238). At the same time, Wharton’s speaker never explicitly implies she wants or plans to die by suicide, and the focus on movement in the last two lines of the poem hints at a more dynamic desire for death. It seems, nonetheless, that through the process of writing the poem, of expelling her psychological suffering, Wharton satiates her thirst for death. The act of writing functions as a stand-in for, or a healthy alternative to, attempting suicide.
These poetic accounts of melancholy, depression, and suicidal ideation—written by women at opposite ends of the long eighteenth century—highlight the longstanding practice of life writing, of using language to represent the interior self. For Wharton and Smith, their personal poetry allows their pain to take up space on the page, even when they themselves feel ambivalent about inhabiting space in the world by being alive. Just as the lyric “I” allows the poets to both document and store their psychological pain, it also provides a medium and outlet for communicating physical pain. Smith experienced chronic pain that worsened as she aged, and Wharton dealt with oftentimes debilitating pain from her chronic illness, which eventually led to her death at age twenty-six.

Beginning in childhood, Wharton suffered recurrent throat pain brought on by ultimately unknown illnesses. In 1672, when Wharton was thirteen years old, she experienced her first serious throat infection. Later that year she sought treatment in Bath, which was the first of several curative-seeking trips she would make throughout her short life. The “storm” Wharton wrote about in 1680, took place on one such trip as she made her way to France. It is impossible to know if the onset of Wharton’s fits preceded her initial treatments at Bath or if they began in the years that followed, but there is no mention of convulsion fits in any of the recovered letters before 1679 (Greer 103). Thus, her seizures might have even been a result of mercury treatment at Bath.

Though the specific timeframe of Wharton’s illnesses might appear unimportant for the scope of Wharton’s place in this thesis, I am dedicating space on my page to it because already so little of Wharton’s life and work is readily accessible and I want to highlight the presence of her physical pain so we might begin to see how it influenced her poetry. Even so, the etiology of
Wharton’s symptoms is far from why I am concerned with her different periods of health and sickness. What I am interested in are the physical and mental experiences of pain that Wharton endured. While we do not have diary entries or an exhaustive collection of her letters, multiple letters documenting Wharton’s health sent to those close to her have survived along with six key letters sent from Wharton to her husband.\textsuperscript{21} In April of 1680, John Cary writes to Sir Ralph Verney that Wharton was “… not well” and that was “troubled with convulsion fitts” (60).\textsuperscript{22} In the months that followed, Cary continued to stress the persistence of Wharton’s seizures, referring to them as “to[o] frequent visitors” (61).\textsuperscript{23}

Cary does mention his concern for Wharton’s life, that those around her at the time “were much afraid she would have died,” but we only get descriptions of her symptoms via an outside perspective (61). From his unavoidably limited position, he can only document how he observes and then interprets Wharton’s behavior. The letters Wharton wrote to her husband throughout her treatments in France, however, paint a more intimate portrait of her pain. In one such letter, dated March 1681, she describes a “fitt” in which she “almost beat [her] branes out against the pavements and found the want of bords, for all little more and it had eased [him] of the inconvenience of a wife” (67).\textsuperscript{24} It would appear that this particular convulsive fit was so severe,

\textsuperscript{21} The letters discussed in relation to Wharton were transcribed by Germaine Green in the Surviving Works of Anne Wharton. Page numbers provided are cited from Greer’s book, and the primary source information will be provided in footnotes.
\textsuperscript{22} 3 April 1680, Claydon Papers (Claydon House, Middle Claydon, Bucks).
\textsuperscript{23} Composition date unknown but received by Verney on 22 May 1680, Claydon Papers; use of the word “seizure” to denote a “sudden attack of illness, especially a fit of apoplexy or epilepsy” does not appear until the late 1700s (OED). And as Greer points out, “convulsion” in the 1670s was “an involuntary contraction [or] stiffening…of a muscle, limb,” what we might today call a “spasm” (OED).
\textsuperscript{24} British Library MS Add. 4, I62, f. 232-2v.
and perhaps occurred so suddenly, that she hit her head on the rough pavement (likely outdoors) and wished she landed on a softer surface (wood flooring, likely covered by a rug).

Aside from giving insight into her bodily experience, what stands out here is Wharton’s diction. The word “beat” alone connotes a sense of violence, and the description of “beat[ing] out” one’s brains might also match one of Johnson’s definitions of “beat”: “to break to powder, or comminute by blows.” “Break to powder” might be similar to our more modern phase “beat to a pulp,” which, coupled with the word “brains” rather than, say, “head,” reads as an especially graphic description of her seizure’s effects. It is unclear if Wharton intended to evoke such a gory image, but pulverized brains spilling out on the pavement is certainly powerful. The second part of the sentence, beginning with “for a little more,” speaks, again, to the severity of Wharton’s fit. For if her seizure had perhaps lasted a bit longer or involved stronger “convulsions,” her life could have been in danger. Referring to her potential demise as easing her husband of the “inconvenience of a wife” appears to be partially tongue in cheek, but, even so, it highlights her negative view of herself. Wharton’s overall tone here is not unlike the longing for self-destruction that we see in “On the Storm.” If we see her sonnet as an opportunity for catharsis, this letter to her husband could serve a similar function—a way for her to express both her physical illness and her psychological torment. And while Wharton’s and Cary’s letters were written for different audiences and with different purposes, the raw and profoundly intimate nature of Wharton’s description greatly changes our perspective/interpretation of her illness. The personal piece is crucial in even scratching the surface in understanding the lived experience of her pain.
The next chapter will look at the subjective pain experience. I will draw on theories of pain, depression, and suicidality, as well as disability studies, to explore the nature of pain, both physical and mental, and how pain affects the lyric poet’s project. Some sects of suicide studies focus on the “vocabulary of suicide,” and recent developments in pain/disability studies, particularly those related to chronic pain, discuss the “language of pain.” Both favor a lexicon particular to pain, created and used by those in pain. In some ways, these ideas push back against, or at least complicate, Woolf’s notion of the “poverty of language” in describing illness in literature, as well as Scarry’s ideas about the ways in which pain “actively destroys language” (6, 161). At the same time, I do not want to understate or minimize what Scarry refers to as pain’s “unshareability,” how impossible it is to truly communicate one’s own or to understand another’s. As William Wandless puts it, “The pain that is written is never the same as the pain that is read” (52). And, while the same could be said of any bodily, sensory, or cognitive experience, it is especially true in instances of pain, perhaps most with chronic pain. My goal is not to provide an “accurate” reading of these poets’ pain, but instead to look at their “readings” of the world around them as evidence of their pain. Chapter Two seeks to first document the importance of those vocabularies and then to work on interpreting those words to see what they might show us about the poets’ pain. How does the bodymind in pain work? How does it produce and utilize poetry?
Chapter Two

The Poetics of Persistent Pain: Grappling with Chronic Pain and Suicidality in Robinson and Smith

An Introduction to Pain

In *Pain Studies*, an extended essay on her experience with chronic migraines, Lisa Olstein uses many different metaphors and analogies in an attempt to understand and analyze— to study—her pain and its effects on herself and her work. Her book is almost an assemblage of quotations interspersed with her own thoughts and associations. She, unsurprisingly, cites Woolf and Scarry’s ideas about pain’s inexpressibility. Like Woolf’s *On Being Ill*, Olstein’s essay is filled with both her own and others’ metaphors for and analogies of pain’s impact on her bodymind. In one of her key descriptions of migraine, she calls it “a space you enter and are enveloped by and it is a different version of the world in there, where perception itself is an identifiable orchestration in full swing” (142). The full body experience of migraine is like entering another plane of existence. You are no longer in the realm of the everyday, but an alternate pain world filled with heightened perception. Every movement is compounded. While overwhelmed by migraine’s symphony, perception is unavoidably influenced by and dependent on migraine. Its infiltrating, and unavoidable, presence completely colors one’s consciousness.

Mental illnesses have a similar effect, where, for example, the depressed person sees their environment through a lens of hopelessness. Anne Finch encapsulates this altered perception in her poem about her own struggles with “spleen.” She addresses her depression directly:
“Through thy black Jandies, I all objects see” (96). And then the experience of active suicidality carries this to the extreme—where one’s consciousness and impulse toward self-preservation is completely usurped by the desire to die. Everything in view is framed by mortality (e.g., “Is the building I’m in tall enough to kill me if I jumped from its roof?” “Is the fall from this cliff high enough to kill me?”).

Scarry’s concept of intense pain as a process of “unmaking” provides another way of thinking about the effects of suicidal ideation. *The Body in Pain* is divided into two key parts—“unmaking” and “making”—as she first details physical pain’s “language-destroying” and “world-destroying” qualities and then ends by suggesting the imagination’s ability to create, to “make,” amidst such a destructive force (19, 29). Scarry’s constitutive example of how pain deconstructs is torture, wherein the process of torture so wholly reduces the prisoner to the point at which only the body remains. The tortured prisoner is left bereft of the “rich sensory world of feelings, ideas, objects, and attachments” and therefore only experiences their “world” (immediate surroundings, stimuli, etc) in relation to the bodily pain experience (Morris 141).

While my argument is not centered around extreme physical pain or torture, I see Scarry’s notion of the “unmaking” process as a useful way of thinking about suicidal ideation. As I have already noted, psychological pain does not actively destroy, or even resist, language as physical suffering does. However, suicidality, like severe pain, reduces. The suicidal are “unmade” by their own brains, their own thoughts, and are, in some senses, “remade” in the image of despair and a desire for death.

25 “Jandies” is an archaic spelling of “jaundice,” “A morbid condition caused by obstruction of the bile, and characterized by yellowness of the conjunctiva, skin, fluids, and tissues” (*OED*).
Olstein’s ideas about pain also speak to recent work from both disability studies and the medical humanities that now favors a phenomenological approach to pain, particularly chronic pain like migraine, rather than the dualist perspective that seeks to understand and treat pain as a sensory experience (chiefly concerned with its somatic effects). In 2020, for the first time in almost forty years, the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) announced a “revised definition of pain,” which came as a result of years of debate and a pronounced push for a broader, more inclusive understanding. Critics of the 1979 definition argued that, while it noted pain’s “subjectivity,” it still failed to “sufficiently integrate phenomenological aspects of pain” (Cohen, et al.). The “notes” included with the definition state that pain is “influenced to varying degrees by biological, psychological, and social factors” (Cohen, et al.). Whether or not the updated definition sufficiently encapsulates the pain experience is up for debate, but what stands out is an increased focus on pain’s subjectivity, as well as its breadth. Even without a specific source or etiology, pain is still pain because of how it is experienced (physically, emotionally, socially) by the individual; by the same token, pain influences (arguably all) other elements of one’s life. This definition change comes in the wake of calls for pain to be treated more holistically (and the goal of the IASP is the treatment of pain), but thinking about pain phenomenologically is crucial to first even learning pain—recognizing it, understanding it, seeing it. The person in pain is existing, observing, and operating in the world in relation to their pain. How they perceive stimuli, interact with others, process emotions, etc., is evidence of pain’s impact, and analyzing that evidence is a way into the study of another’s pain.

As Olstein writes of pain, one learns to endure it by relying on “certain stabilities” (143). The familiarity of pain, the knowledge that the pain eventually, even temporarily, stops or
lessens or changes. The same might be said of the effect poetry, specifically lyric poetry, can have on the suicidal poet. Gregory Orr differentiates between a lyric poet and a “person who does not write poems”: “…the poet has an arena in which to focus his or her encounter with disorder” (84). The poem becomes both a site of and structure for chaos and pain. Edna St. Vincent Millay begins one of her poems with an acknowledgment of the sonnet’s structure: “I will put Chaos into fourteen lines/ And keep him there” (1-2). When the poet’s inner world is in a state of unrest, when pain in all its varieties and variations feels inescapable, the space of the poem provides a much-needed structure within which they can both exercise and excise their pain. This thesis is, indeed, a case study, and my readings of the poems discussed in this chapter are, at least in part, an attempt to analyze these poets’ pain. The language through which the speakers narrate their thoughts and describe their environments is as important as the structure of the poems. “She is in pain, as is the poem itself….this text is in pain. It aches,” writes Doireann Ni Ghriofa (19).

**Mary Robinson’s Pain**

Like Wharton, Robinson struggled with progressive physical illness and pain. In 1783, when she was only twenty-four, Robinson “brought on a fever” while traveling post-chaise to France (Memoirs 196). The initial illness “confined her to her bed during six months,” after which she experienced “violent rheumatism, which progressively deprived her of the use of her limbs” (Memoirs 196). Out of all the poets discussed in this thesis, Robinson’s physical pain was by far the most “public.” Already a prominent actress at the onset of her illness, news of her condition circulated rapidly through newspapers. Many contemporary commentators made her disability an issue of morality by ascribing her paralysis to a potential miscarriage, syphilitic
infection, or divine justice, all of which place emphasis, and blame, on Robinson’s reputation.26
Similar to Wharton’s experience, the exact etiology of Robinson’s illness is not important for our
purposes, but the sort of public mythology of scandal surrounding Robinson is worth noting,
particularly for its potential effect on Robinson’s life writing (which remains the most direct
point of entry into her pain experience).

Memoirs of the Late Mrs. Robinson, Written by Herself was first published in 1801.
About seventy percent of the text is from Robinson’s own hand, and the rest is a “Continuation.
By a Friend” written in third person.27 Scholars continue to debate where exactly Robinson’s
own narrative ends and where that of the anonymous third party begins, as well as how much of
the “Continuation” is fictionalized. Brewer sees the “Continuation” as a text “clearly intended to
rehabilitate and defend Robinson’s reputation,” and it is easy to read parts of it as Robinson
adopting a third person perspective, attempting to control and shape her life’s narrative from a
seemingly removed point of view—eliciting empathy and understanding without having to rely
on her own already tarnished identity to do so (123). Judith Pascoe suggests that Robinson did, in
fact, finish the entire text herself, but adopted the third person as a “distancing strategy” (117).
But the “rehabilitation” efforts in the later portion of Memoirs may well have been (or been
influenced) by her daughter, someone who would have been tangibly affected by Robinson’s

26 See pages 109-112 of William D. Brewer’s chapter, “Mary Robinson’s Paralysis and the Discourse of
Disability,” in Disabling Romanticism, ed. Michael Bradshaw (2016) for a summary of published reports
on Robinson’s illness.
27 In the introduction of the Works of Mary Robinson, Vol. 7, William D. Brewer finds that, although the
“Friend” was “generally assumed” to be Robinson’s daughter Maria, or Maria with the help of someone
else, the identity of the anonymous biographer is most likely Samuel Jackson Pratt, a writer himself with
whom Maria “was in affectionate correspondence after her mother’s death” (xxi).
Because Robinson’s first-person account cuts off before the event of her initial illness in 1783, we must take the subsequent descriptions of her pain and its effects with a grain of salt.

We learn from her *Memoirs* that in 1791, the same year in which her collection *Poems* was published, Robinson “became gradually reconciled to the calamitous state of her health,” and “the mournful certainty of total and incurable lameness…was alleviated by the consciousness of intellectual resource, and by the activity of fertile fancy” (280). Not only did her illness inspire creativity, but her creativity helped her cope with her illness. In confronting her physical limitations, she turned to the limitlessness of her imagination. She spent the summer in Bath, simultaneously receiving treatment and writing poetry, but the “perpetual exercise of the imagination and intellect, added to an uniform and sedentary life, affected the system of her nerves, and contributed to debilitate her frame” (280). Her doctor, seeing the effect constant creation was having on her health, prohibited her from writing, yet when not under surveillance, Robinson ignored his instructions and simply “resume[d] her books and her pen” (280). To Brewer, Robinson’s disability is rendered as “inspirational and therapeutic,” while still “conced[ing] that her incredible productivity sometimes had negative physical and mental consequences” (115). Though such negative consequences are noted in the quoted passage above—the effects on her nerves and frame—her decision to defy her doctor’s orders in favor of intense productivity immediately follows and, thus, overshadows the concern for her wellbeing.

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28 At the time of Robinson’s death, Maria’s only income was “the irregularly paid half-annuity granted her under the [Prince of Wales]’s settlement of 1783 (xxi). Robinson was at one point the Prince’s paid mistress, and even after their affair ended, he continued—somewhat sporadically—to support her and her daughter.
On the one hand, writing is its own medicine, according to Memoirs, so the choice to focus on Robinson’s extreme dedication to her craft might speak to the importance, effectiveness, or even necessity of that particular antidote over others (e.g., mental and physical rest). It is also true that Robinson lived by her pen; her resolve to steadily produce content also had a practical aspect that cannot be ignored. In Pain Woman Takes Her Keys, Sonya Huber discusses her own experience with writing about pain and writing while in pain: “The pushing and tension required to produce and produce and produce will, over time, destroy a person in chronic pain” (49). The pressure to churn out poem after poem, essay after essay, undoubtedly exacerbated Robinson’s pain and added to her anguish.

Even so, the narrative of Memoirs almost valorizes Robinson’s writing, highlighting the pleasure she gets from continuing to write despite the physical and emotional toll it takes. And, while Robinson’s writing routine is more than understandable, it is worth investigating how Memoirs—juxtaposed with her letters and poems—portrays Robinson’s clearly complex relationship with both her writing and her illness. While writing this next section, I kept returning to a question posed by Huber: “…which woman is a better writer—me in pain or me without [?],” and I think it is worth keeping in mind as we delve into the particulars of Robinson’s poems. How does pain influence poetry? Is pain a palimpsest that sits below the poem’s surface, an effaced framework on which to build? Or is it an almost pervasive presence, inseparable from the poem's form and content? Does it help or hinder literary production?
Poetic Pain

Robinson’s sonnet, “Written at Sea, in the Month of September, 1792” speaks to Smith’s “Written on the sea shore” in interesting ways. Not only do both poems feature an imagined mariner—“the poor mariner” in Smith’s and “the poor hopeless MARINER” in Robinson’s—but they also utilize similar stylistic patterns (lines 10; 5). While Smith’s speaker watches the “billows break” from atop “some rude fragment of the rocky shore,” Robinson’s speaker listens to the “billows roar” as she sails over the “waste of waters” (1-2; 4,1). Smith uses the image of the mariner more directly by creating a simile (“Like the poor mariner, methinks, I stand”), but the presence of Robinson’s mariner functions a bit differently. The speaker is already out at sea in stormy weather when she imagines a mariner who is “doom’d to wake no more,” and she weeps for him and his “friends far off” who are “destin’d to deplore” (6, 8). But starting in the third stanza, she questions this character she has created: “Yet, why should FANCY others’ woes reveal? / Have I not felt the rudest storms of Fate, / And prov’d each pang the hopeless breast can feel?” (9-11). There are several ways to read both the mariner’s presence in the poem and the speaker’s rhetorical questions. On the one hand, Robinson seems to be wondering why she imagined a sailor facing certain death when she herself has faced worse or at least equally difficult life circumstances herself. In this reading, his metaphoric death by storm is juxtaposed with her literal tempestuous life circumstances. It is just as true that she, as someone also braving the elements, could be destined for death as the mariner is, and, in this way, she seems to be

29 The Works of Mary Robinson, vol. 1: Poems, ed. Daniel Robinson (2009). Unless otherwise noted, subsequent references to Robinson’s poems are from the same source and will be cited parenthetically by line number.
pondering why she is using her imagination to create a scenario for a mariner when the very real possibility of her own demise is right in front of her.

This leads to the last lines of the poem: “Then, FORTUNE, I defy thy fiercest hate! / Henceforth each sensate nerve be hard as steel; / For where DESPAIR resides, REFLECTION comes TOO LATE!” (12-14). If she realizes she does not need to create a mariner for the projection of her feelings, then she can be honest about the possibility of her own death. But whereas she wept for the seaman and his family, she will not weep for herself. She has already experienced everything a “hopeless breast can feel,” and, thus, she almost has nothing left to fear. She knows true despair because of the adversity she has faced. Like Smith’s speaker, she is “already shipwreck’d by the storms of Fate” (9), so the threat or even thought of death—Fortune’s “fiercest hate”—is not cause for fear or lament. It might even be welcomed. And like Wharton’s speaker, who “sunk in Seas of Grief, could dare the Wind,” whose ambivalence toward life the seamen mistook for bravery, Robinson’s speaker would not approach a potential premature death as a cruel fate, as something to be mourned (12). There are many layers to Robinson’s realizations here, in a poem that might appear deceptively straightforward, but a common thread is an acceptance of death; not necessarily a longing for death—or perhaps not for a deliberate one—but definitely an embrace. And yet, the speaker remains conflicted. Despite her declaration of despair and renunciation of feeling at the end of the poem, she is clearly still grappling with the effects of her despair and how much control it has over her life.

“Written at Sea” also offers an example of some of Scarry’s ideas about pain-and-imagining at work. “Physical pain,” Scarry argues, “is an intentional state without an intentional object...Thus...it may be appropriate to think of pain as the imagination’s intentional state, and
to identify the imagination as pain’s intentional object” (164). This is the basis for Scarry’s argument that imagination, which leads to creation, is pain’s counterpoint in that pain serves as the catalyst for creation. You are in pain, and you use your imagination to somehow alleviate or alter that pain. This activity takes many forms according to Scarry, from imagining a glass of water when thirsty to making a coat to keep warm (i.e., feel less cold). The same might be true of Robinson’s sonnets. Scarry explicitly writes about physical pain of course, but the kind of pain Robinson seems to be expressing in “Written at Sea” still dovetails with Scarry’s ideas. She also writes about how the natural world interacts with pain-and-imagining, how the ways in which we interact with the landscape before us (e.g., how long I look across the ocean) is dependent on how well that landscape “achieve[s] self-objectification” (e.g., how long I look across the ocean before the experience is no longer helpful because reflection is too bright, or the water brings up an undesirable memory, or the waves become too loud) (168). This means that the ways in which we engage with our environment speak to our internal states, notably what kind or level of pain we might be feeling.

Scarry also shows that we use imagination to “provide a standard for judging the acceptability of objects in the naturally given world” (168). That is, imagining only needs to occur when what is already present is not sufficient. The less the object (e.g., the stormy sea) “accommodates and expresses the inner requirements” of the state (e.g., desire), the more the state approaches pain (which, in turn, activates the imagination) (168). Robinson’s sonnet begins with a description of the seascape before her: the vast expanse of deep, dark ocean water, the faint outline of the shore, the raging winds and roaring waves. The next stanza shifts directly to a discussion of the mariner and his friends (5-6). The speaker is weeping for them all—the mariner
because he is doomed to die in the storm, and his friends because they are destined to mourn his
loss. It is clear, however, that the mariner and his loved ones are simply characters in a narrative
the speaker has created, seemingly inspired by the storm she finds herself in. If we apply
Scarry’s pain-and-imagining logic to the creation of this poem, it seems that simply observing
and describing the landscape was not enough because it did not achieve the speaker’s desired
effect. There is obviously no way to know what exactly that desired effect is, but if we view this
sonnet or any of the sonnets in this thesis as tools not only to express but also to curb suicidal
urges, then perhaps the chaos of the stormy seas (either her physical observation of it or her
poetic depiction of it) did not accurately reflect the complexity of her psychological state. The
invention of the mariner adds another layer of feeling.

Something similar happens in Smith’s sonnet, where, after describing the landscape and
storm before her, she admits that “the wild gloomy scene has charms for [her], / And suits the
mournful temper of [her] soul” and then takes it a step further in the last stanza by introducing a
“poor mariner” who is “cast on a rock” (7-8, 10-11). Both poets achieve at least some relief
among the billowing waves, and perhaps it is because the stormy seas match their tempestuous
thoughts that they are able to use that particular natural setting to explore their thoughts and
feelings around death. Smith and Robinson find that you need a life to talk about death, and,
thus, an imaginary mariner, lost and trapped at sea, is the perfect proxy for their own desire for
death (or at least ambivalence toward life).

What is interesting, though, is that Robinson does not stay with the image of the mariner.
She utilizes it in the second stanza but then immediately questions her use of it: “Yet, why
should FANCY others’ woes reveal? / Have I not felt the rudest storms of Fate, / And prov’d
each pang the hopeless breast can feel?” (9-11). Why am I using my imagination to create an ill-fated sailor when I myself am already doomed by fortune, she asks herself? She has already experienced the worst of the worst, so she does not need the death of a fictional man to shock, upset, or really impact her in any way. In the next two lines she addresses “Fortune”: “I defy thy fiercest hate! / Henceforth each sensate nerve be hard as steel” (12-13). If Fortune’s “fiercest hate” is death, the speaker simultaneously acknowledges that death would not be the worst thing that could befall her and admits that the thought of her own demise is no longer upsetting to her. Not only has she been through worse, but she also is not going to get herself worked up over whether or not she will survive this storm because Fortune has dealt her too many blows already. She knows to expect the worst. This time around, she is not viewing death as the least desirable option.

But where does this leave the “imagining” piece of the “pain-and-imagining” in the poem? While the speaker essentially renounces her need of the fictive mariner and “reflection” itself, the very existence of the sonnet speaks to the necessary role of imaginative creation. One reading of the poem is a commentary on the use of poetic fancy, poetic creation. The speaker calls out both “Fancy” and “Reflection,” and in the last line suggests that “reflection” (which could imply introspection, imagination, and poetic creation) is useless against despair: “For where DESPAIR resides, REFLECTION comes TOO LATE!” (14). While it may be true that putting thoughts and feelings into writing poetry can and will not rid her of despair, the fact that this sonnet was written—and written extempore—shows that “reflection” served some purpose, even if only to give Robinson the space to grapple with her hopelessness. Even so, there is clearly still a tension within the poem surrounding the usefulness of literary production. Writing
was a source of conflict throughout Robinson’s literary career, though much of the conflict came near the end of her life when her livelihood was dependent upon her literary production. Even earlier in her illness, though, she still had a complicated relationship with her writing.

The Poet in Pain

On the one hand, Robinson’s periods of illness were often her most poetically productive. And, as we saw above, she turned to writing—intellectual activity—as a way to make her physical pain bearable. At the same time, there was a great deal of pressure associated with her writing. Aside from her monetary stress bound up in her creative output, Robinson also struggled to work with her body in pain. She describes the effects her writing is having on her mind in a letter: “My head is so disordered, and I fear my brain will catch the contagion of pain, and incapacitate me for all scribbling propensities” (310). In the same letter she admits that she “can scarcely see the paper,” for her “head is in so terrible a state” (310). Her worry about her brain becoming infected with her physical pain speaks to her reliance on her mind’s strength amidst her worsening pain and paralysis.

30 My source for Robinson’s letters is Sharon Setzer’s “Original letters of the celebrated Mrs. Mary Robinson” (Philological Quarterly, Vol. 8, Issue 33): a collection of fifteen letters sent by Robinson during the last year of her life transcribed and edited by Setzer. Letters she sent during the last several months before Robinson’s death highlight her struggle to make enough money by her pen to keep herself out of debtor's prison, while her increasingly debilitating physical and mental pain often made it nearly impossible to write. On August 4th she wrote that she could “scarcely see the paper” and that her “head [was] in a terrible state,” and on August 10th, she wrote, “I am growing more feeble, and the effort of writing is now more painful to me. The fatigue is too severe for my strength to support, and I am absolutely worn out, in powers, before the day is half wasted” (314).
Throughout Robinson’s letters, it is clear that she dealt with chronic headaches, and pain associated with her brain was threatening, upsetting, and disorientating. If her imagination and intellectual capacity are what supply her solace—and belief in her life (e.g., if she can write, she can find relief; if she can write, her life can have purpose, be livable)—any knock at that is almost immediately existential. This is not to say that her headaches, or any of her other bodily pain, weakened her imagination or artistic ability, but rather that her pain was often so severe that it affected her ability to function at all, let alone write.31 Kay Redfield Jamison writes about the effects of depression and suicidality on the mind, reminding us that the brain’s “inability to think fluently, reason clearly, or perceive the future with hopes” is a hallmark of depression and that those who are depressed “think more slowly, are more easily distracted, tire more quickly in cognitive tasks, and find their memory wanting” (Jamison 92). That same “impaired cognitive functioning” is also present in “highly suicidal patients” (Jamison 92). Robinson had two obstacles working against her—physical pain and psychological pain—both of which undoubtedly affected her “cognitive functioning.” Thinking back to my discussion of pain and suicidal ideation, and specifically the ways in which the lens of the former might be useful in looking at the latter, we see that the two are perhaps even more inexplicably tied than we thought. The culmination of her pain experience, with all its strands and shards, is interconnected. Her physical pain clearly contributed to her psychological pain, and her mental

31 This is not to say that a life without intellectual and creative pursuits—whether voluntarily abstained or involuntarily prevented by pain—is automatically not worth living. My wish is only to stress the tremendous weight writing and creativity carried in Robinson’s life and how strongly her wavering (unreliable) writing abilities weighed upon her mind.
pain impacted her both ability and desire to survive. In the *History of Pain*, Roselyne Rey tells us that, “When pain is intense and persistent or simply chronic, it always involves the entire being. It does not limit itself to the painful region, but it is the whole person as an individual entity who then becomes affected as a result” (3).

In “Ode to Health,” Robinson addresses “Health” directly: “To live is anguish, when depriv’d of Thee” (line 84). Her poem “Life” asks, “What of tedious Life remains?” and then answers, “…cureless pains; / Till DEATH appears, a welcome friend, / To bid the scene of sorrow end” (142). The reality of her not only chronic, but progressive, pain leads her to explicit suicidal ideation. This also, of course, echoes the end of Wharton’s sonnet: “In Life, tempestuous Life is dread and harm, / Approaching Death had no unpleasing Form; / Approaching Death appeases ev’ry Storm” (lines 13-15). When hopelessness takes over, death, or at least the thought of it, is all the more desirable. Robinson was acutely aware of her mortality. As she neared the end of her life (at age 43), she began to write explicitly about her thoughts of death. On the 29th of August she wrote, “I am not destined to be a traveler long, on this vile earth…I know I shall not live long. The machine is worn out with sorrow, and the thread of life is almost exhausted” (317). Her letters from this time show a woman completely wrapped in, and trapped by, encompassing pain, seeing death as not only impending, but desirable. This clearly highlights Robinson’s understanding of the severity and ultimate lethality of her illness, but it also begins to communicate the deep depression she experienced, certainly at the time she composed the letter but also throughout her life. She is not simply sad, but “worn out with

sorrow.” She has been degraded by suffering, left tattered and threadbare by both illness and despair.

By 1800, she reached her limit. A few months later she wrote,

…am I guilty of a crime, when I say that I do not rejoice in my prospect of passing a few more melancholy days on this earth—this earth! Where I am destined to know nothing but calamity! With a broken spirit, and a broken heart, how can I feel grateful for a short span of protracted suffering? Why did I make any effort to live? I hate existence, I loathe the thoughts of life. I sigh, I wait impatiently for the quiet of the grave!” (320)

While an effective rhetorical move in its own right, Robinson’s question about criminality speaks directly to eighteenth-century suicide debates and even contemporary ideas about removing the phrase “committed suicide” from our lexicon because it refers back to suicide’s illicit past.33 Yet Robinson’s queries ground us in the present moment of her suffering. If her existence brings “nothing but calamity,” do we blame her for hating it, for anxiously awaiting its end? Dr. Edwin S. Shneidman defines suicide, in part, as “the desire to reduce painful tension by stopping the unbearable flow of consciousness” (17). “Suicidal death,” he writes, “…is an escape from pain” (7). Robinson’s consciousness was flooded by waves of her pain’s relentless ebbs and flows, which left her drowning in pain. In longing for “the quiet of the grave,” she is aching with desire

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33 Though it should be noted that by the end of the eighteenth century, public thought was moving away from considering suicide a crime and toward seeing it as a result of madness. In his Treatise on Female, Nervous, Hysterical, Hypochondriacal, Bilious, Compulsive Diseases (1788), William Rowley, M.D. includes an essay titled “On Suicide.” He writes, “As no rational being will voluntarily give himself pain, or deprive himself of life, which certainly…must be acknowledged evils; it follows, that every one who commits suicide is indubitably non compos mentis, not able to reason justly; but is under the influence of the mind, and therefore suicide should ever be considered an act of insanity” (343).
for death, for the noise of her pain to be silenced. Her honest declarations are evidence of a
woman worn by psychic and physical pain, consumed by hopelessness, and fixated on death.

Even as attitudes toward suicide shifted from criminality to insanity, there still remained
a moral judgment, a question of ethics and logic, and a confusion of why. Suicide was, and is
still, seen as so unnatural, so antithetical to life and vitality that its motives were written off as
the result of a sick mind without considering the (what I would argue are) logical reasons for
desiring death. It is not my place to determine whether Robinson’s, or anyone’s, reasoning
behind her suicidal ideation is made of sound mind, but I think it is worth pausing to consider the
enormity of her essentially lifelong suffering; the chronic, progressive, and incurable nature of
her illness; and the pervasive depression that developed as a result. Her ideation is not an
instance of impulsivity, nor is it a lapse in judgment or evidence of madness. Rather, it is a
symptom of her bodymind in pain, a response to accrued suffering.

A decade before her death, though still wracked with pain and its attendant melancholy,
Robinson was arguably more ambivalent. The speakers of her poems from 1789-1791 are not so
much dedicated to dying as they are conflicted about living. As I noted in Chapter One,
“Ambivalence saturates the suicidal act” (Jamison 39). Though neither Robinson nor her
speakers engage in suicidal behavior, they flirt with actions and attempts on the page. The
settings and “stories” of many of Robinson’s sonnets certainly lend themselves to expressions of
suicidal ideation, but their formal aspects do too.
The Prosody of Pain

We see this same tension regarding the speaker’s will to live in Robinson’s poem, and the tension overall can be read through its stylistic features. In a fashion similar to that of Smith’s sonnet, the alliteration and assonance throughout “Written at Sea” work to mirror the speaker’s internal struggles. The first stanza is the most complex, as Robinson plays with a variety of sounds across all four lines. Starting with line 1, “While o’er the waste of waters, loud and deep,” the first consonant “w” is repeated, but every word has a different vowel sound. The shift between “while,” “waste,” and “waters” and the words in between them mimics the undulation of waves, and the mixture of vowel sounds contributes to the image of the ocean as vast and desolate. In line 2, we get a repetition of vowel sounds in “dimly” and “cliffs” instead of alliteration. Line 3, “While low’ring shadows o’er the OCEAN sweep,” plays with both consonant and vowel sounds. The “o” sound appears in the middle of the line, and there’s a sort of alliterative chiasmus with “shadows o’er” and “ocean sweep,” again easily imitating the ebb and flow of waves. The last line of the stanza, “And wild winds whistle, as the billows roar,” is a mix of the first three, where the “w” sound is repeated (as it was in the first line) in “wild winds whistle,” and the vowel sounds in “billows” and “roar” match the vowel sounds of the first two words of the stanza, “while” and “o’er.” Like Smith’s sonnet, where the varying placement of alliteration mirrors both the movement of waves and the speaker’s internal sense of vacillation, the change in sounds from line to line in this stanza matches the chaotic yet cyclic nature of the ocean during a storm. Nothing is exactly the same from line to line, but even the matching alliteration and mirroring of vowel sounds portray it as somewhat of a contained unit— something that the following stanzas do not have. This starts to make sense when we realize that
the first stanza is the simplest, or most straightforward, psychologically and emotionally speaking. While the ocean’s shadowy surface might match the speaker’s gloomy psyche, she only starts tackling subjects of emotion and past trauma in the following two stanzas.

The second stanza has alliteration in line 6, “For friends far” and “destin’d to deplore,” and we get “safely sleep” at the end of line seven, all of which describe the imagined mariner’s loved ones. This accentuates the difference between the soon-to-be-dead mariner and his very much alive friends. However, the lack of coherent pattern mimics the chaos of the storm and the speaker’s fluctuating mood leading into the last stanza, where the unruly alliteration continues. In lines 9-10, for example, “Yet, why should FANCY others’ woes reveal? / Have I not felt the rudest storms of Fate,” the only alliteration comes from “why” and “woes”; “felt” and “Fate,” and even considering those repetitive sounds in those instances is a stretch. The first and last stanza are nevertheless connected by these similarities (which might mirror the cyclic nature of the tide), but the progressive disorder visible at the end highlights the speaker’s fluctuating mood.

Stanza three documents the change in the speaker’s thought process from feeling overwhelmed by “others’ woes” to resolving to keep her nerves “hard as steel” in line 13. In that same line, the consonant pattern is similarly fluctuating, but instead of forming the kind of alliterative chiasmus we saw in line 3, it creates a harsher, more cacophonous effect. In “Henceforth each sensate never be hard as steel,” the matching consonants skip around, with “h,” “s,” “h,” and “s.” If lines 3 and 13 are connected, not so much by their content, but by their simultaneously similar and dissimilar prosody, it is worth taking a closer look at their meter:

Yet, why should FANCY others’ woes reveal?
Have I not felt the rudest storms of Fate,
And prov’d each pang the hopeless breast can feel?
Then, FORTUNE, I defy thy fiercest hate!
Henceforth each sensate nerve be hard as steel;
For where DESPAIR resides, REFLECTION comes TOO LATE! (9-14)

In line 3, the iambic pentameter of the alliterative words creates the same chiastic effect, where “shadow” and “ocean” are both stressed/unstressed, and “o’er” and “sweep” are both stressed. Furthermore, the meter is the same for the starting consonants of each word. Line 13, however, follows no such pattern. Instead, the repeated sounds stress, according to the meter, “forth” in “henceforth,” “sens” in “sensate,” stressed/unstressed in “sensate,” and both “hard” and “steel.” The initial mirroring of unstressed/stressed and stressed/unstressed almost sets up an expectation that “hard” and “steel” might follow suit (even if we only look at the accents of the first syllables). Subverting that expectation, and coupled with the several other stylistic shifts throughout, this mimics the speaker’s overall ambivalence.

The dictates of the sonnet form also provide a useful framework for containing both conflicting feelings and suicidal urges, which we can see in “Written by the Sea” as well as several of Robinson’s other sonnets. Robinson’s conflicted feelings about life and death, about hope and despair, leave her in a state of fragmentation and disarray, of feeling “unmade,” as Scarry writes about pain. It is safe to say that Robinson’s physical pain has a similar effect. As a sonneteer, she goes through a process of gathering the disparate parts of her mental pain and assembling them into a lyric poem. If Robinson, as a woman in severe mental and physical pain, is “unmade” by suicidal ideation, she can be (re)“made” through the act of writing poetry. The
sonnet’s form works as a vehicle for this process. As Ashley Cross writes of the eighteenth-century sonnet, “…it became a ground on which authors could construct and reconstruct themselves” (54).

Robinson published many sonnets throughout her literary career, many of which were initially written for magazines and then later collected and published together, so it is difficult to construct a timeline of when her poems were written and in which order; it is still possible, however, to draw connections between many of her sonnets, namely ones related to the sea. Her poem “The Mariner,” originally published in the Oracle in 1789, features the same seafaring figure we see in “Written at Sea.” In this poem, though, the focus (at least on the surface) is entirely on the mariner himself and is written entirely in third-person. He is “sea-beat” and “many a boist’rous night hath wak’d to weep” (lines 1-2). Stuck amidst stormy seas and forced to face the ocean’s “rav’rous deep,” the mariner spends each “dreary hour / Creep[ing] slowly onward to the dawn of Day,” when “PHOEBUS” will use his “golden beam” to warm “the frothy spray” (4-8). Once the skies clear and the sun begins to shine, the mariner rejoices that “‘Another tedious Night is o’er’” and sets sail once more (10). Upon returning home and seeing his “darling Mistress — and his native Shore,” he “forgets his pain” and decides to “brav[e] his Fate again” (12-14). Though arguably more removed than “Written at Sea,” “Mariner” still paints a picture of Robinson’s internal struggles with despair and hope. By utilizing the third-person, she is able to potentially say more than she might feel safe to say if she were to rely on the lyric “I.” Composing a poem already aids Robinson in working through her thoughts and emotions, but perhaps Robinson also needed an extra layer of distance—the insertion of a fictive character—to help wrangle her despair. This sonnet is plot-focused, essentially telling the reader
a story about a character Robinson invented. The mariner can easily be read as a stand-in for Robinson, his narrative a metaphor for her own psychological experience and pain. It might also function as a way for Robinson to explore, come to terms with, and analyze her experience of chronic hopelessness and her ambivalence towards life.

Juxtaposing the mariner’s despair with the night and his hopefulness with day is nothing new. It is even a biological fact that our moods are affected by darkness and nighttime. In the dead of night, our thoughts can easily start to match our surroundings, and the enveloping darkness can feel consuming, oppressive, inescapable. Still, or stuck, awake during that time, the morning cannot come soon enough. The shift from dark to light, dusk to dawn, is also a common metaphor for coming out of a depressive episode (or a period of sadness or grief). Making it through a difficult night, or a difficult life experience, is proof that it is possible, that the shade depression casts is ultimately permeable, that moods are not static.

And this brings us back to definitions and descriptions of the suicidal mindset. Depression morphs into suicidality when it seems like there is not, nor will there ever be, a light at the end of the tunnel, an end to the pain, a life that feels livable. For the suicidal, “the future cannot be separated from the present, and the present is painful beyond solace” (Jamison 93). Shneidman articulates this key characteristic of the suicidal mind as “constriction, [which] refers to a narrowing or tunneling of the focus of attention” (59). “Constriction” is applied to a variety

34 See Anna Justice’s “Diurnal variation of depressive symptoms” (Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience): “The evening-worse pattern [mood dropping at night] is associated with many neurotic features, depressive mood, anxiety, and a cognitive style indicative of hopelessness.”
35 We might refer to someone’s melancholic state as a “dark mood.” The beginning of Dante’s journey in the Inferno begins in a “dark wood.” One of the most famous memoirs about mental illness and suicide is William Styron’s Darkness Visible (1989).
of dichotomous thinking that is present in those who are suicidal, but the most dangerous is a belief that death is the only solution, or even the only option. Sometimes death can present itself as a choice one makes because it is the only way to escape or stop seemingly insurmountable pain. Sometimes death feels inevitable, necessary, because life as it is currently has become unbearable. At the same time, suicidal thoughts are pervasive. They infiltrate every thought and mood, similarly to how pain colors perception so that one only sees through its lens. Suicidality can feel overwhelming, all-encompassing—the opposite of constriction—but the suicidal are bound by despair, weakened (in terms of willpower) by hopelessness. Because the suicidal experience is difficult, because it both “constricts” and overwelms, it requires a multifaceted approach to contain it. The sonnet provides such a solution.

The Sonnet in Pain

“Mariner” follows a coherent narrative arc. The first stanza provides exposition by explaining the mariner’s nightly predicament, the second includes both the climax and the beginning of the resolution as the long-awaited sun finally rises, and the third brings both the mariner’s relief and his resolution to return to sea to once again “brave his fate.” While the plot Robinson chooses to follow is simple—so simple that it almost reads like a fable—it could easily be expanded into a longer poetic form. Robinson made a deliberate choice to fit this “sea-beat” mariner’s story into a sonnet, thus condensing it to its most fundamental parts. That does not mean, however, that the poem is devoid of details and intricacies. Robinson still uses evocative descriptions of the setting—“boist’rous night,” “keen blast,” “rav’rous deep,” “chilling rain”—to externalize the mariner’s, and perhaps her own, internal state (2-4). But by confining these
details to three lines, Robinson is able to both communicate and contain psychological chaos. Robinson’s story of the mariner, his journey from despair to hope, manifests that sense of hope for the reader.

In *Poetry as Survival*, Gregory Orr writes that “…*every* encounter with disorder of any sort that results in a poem is a successful encounter in the most basic sense…namely, the poet survived….The very fact of the poem’s existence on the page is proof of its efficacy for survival, proof that poet succeeded in ordering his or her disorder” (83). Just as the sonnet’s narrative is proof of the mariner’s survival, the poem’s existence is evidence of Robinson’s vitality. Her ability to take her own experience of hopelessness, map it onto a fictional character, and then craft that into coherent and concise stanzas is evidence of her successfully “constricting” her suicidal ideation to the space of the poem (Shneidman 59). The poem both serves as a container for her despair and exists as testament to her ability to contain her destructive urges. As readers, we might initially fear for the mariner’s life, and wonder if he will make it through the seemingly never-ending darkness. By the poem’s end, though, we are reassured that he not only endured the night but will continue to endure (as he ultimately decides to face another “bois’trous night” out at sea) (2). Perhaps the mariner’s resilience reflects Robinson’s own longing for bravery in the face of adversity, a way to manufacture a resolve to stay alive. Writing the poem is also an act of resistance.

In John Donne’s *Biathanatos*, a controversial work often described, and criticized, as a defense of suicide, he navigates the act of “self-homicide” by interleaving his ideas with those of
philosophers. As Donne works out his own thoughts about death, it is easy to read at least parts of the text as an attempt to overcome the temptation to take his own life. At one point Donne asks,

…how much more may I, when I am weather-beaten and in danger of betraying that precious soul which God hath embarked in me, put off this burdensome flesh, till His pleasure be that I shall resume it? For this is not to sink the ship, but to retire it to safe harbor and assured anchor. (111)

Donne imagines himself “weather-beaten” and cast out at sea amidst a tempest like Robinson’s mariner, evaluating his life and contemplating his death. He questions how much longer he must endure such stormy conditions and wonders why he must continue a hopeless, burdensome life in respect for God’s plan. Death, to Donne, would rescue him from the stormy seas. Its finality would relieve all threat of future danger, which is reminiscent of Wharton’s poem as she sees “tempestuous Life” as “dread and harm,” while “Approaching Death appeases ev’ry Storm” (lines 13, 14). Like the poets in this thesis, Donne’s meditation on suicide functions as a form of therapy and catharsis. It allows him the space to, in a sense, act out his suicidal urges using the setting of a metaphoric storm. Though Robinson’s “Mariner” ends with a declaration of survival, we know from the beginning of the poem that this is only one of many nights he “hath wak’d to weep” (2). His story is Sisyphean, and his witness of the coming day does not necessarily bring us relief or satisfaction.

36 Originally written in 1608, but published posthumously in 1648. The quoted text is from the critical edition edited by Michael Rudnick and M. Pabst Battin (1982). Part of the subtitle reads, “A Declaration of that Paradox or Thesis, that Self-Homicide is not so naturally Sin that it may never be otherwise.”
One reading of the poem is that though life is full of hardships that seem inescapable at the time, those struggles eventually resolve (even if only temporarily). And perhaps that is good enough, or a good enough reason to keep living. It is also possible to read the poem’s ending as somewhat ironic. The poem presents life as full of eternal suffering; even if the pain ends or lessens, the knowledge that it will only return again has to be unavoidable. Even though the mariner, upon seeing his mistress and homeland, “forgets his pain,” we, as readers, know the pain will nevertheless return. Like Donne’s rhetorical questions about the limits of his endurance, Robinson might be asking if the mariner’s homecoming is actually a happy ending. Is the short-lived respite enough? This is complicated further when we think about Robinson’s experience with not only chronic but progressive pain. Her illness was lifelong, but it was also increasingly debilitating. There was no pain-free, able-bodied light at the end of the tunnel, which undoubtedly contributed to her suicidal ideation, in seeing death as a release from pain and struggle. Robinson had times of recovery, times when she felt better than others, when her headaches came less often or were less severe, when her pain subsided and she was better able to write. “Mariner” could thus be a reminder for herself: that her pain sometimes comes in waves, that there will be lulls in the storm. Whether the poem is a call for continued endurance in spite of life’s trials, an admission of their continuity, or a hybrid, Robinson is able to capture and contain her complicated feelings about her own mortality and about weathering life’s storms.

Robinson’s poem also speaks to one of Charlotte Smith’s sonnets, “To the morning star. Written near the sea,” about a nighttime journey to shore. Smith’s poem details a similar narrative of a “Seaman” who, while out in the ocean at night, “greets” the star’s “precursive friendly beam” as it guides him to the shore, “the long-sought haven” (2-4). Like Robinson’s
mariner, Smith’s longs to reach the shore and “hails the lights that rise / To guide his footsteps to expecting love” (7-8). Smith’s fictive character does not, however, approach the dark sea with dread. Instead of relying on the sun’s morning light to calm the storm, the seaman uses starlight to guide him home even in the darkness. The setting of Smith’s poem is not the same tempestuous sea of Robinson’s. Smith does not describe the water, or the weather, at all in relation to the mariner—aside from referring to the star’s light reflected “on the Ocean stream” (which conjures an image of calm waters, if anything) (2). Her focus is more on the distinction between the mariner’s seafaring experience and her own. After documenting his journey home, easily and helpfully guided by the star, in the first two stanzas, she turns to how differently she experiences the star’s “bright radiance” (10). “As night’s clouds retire,” she too watches the star while it “glances on the sea” (9-10). But whereas the mariner sees its brilliance as a hopeful reminder of the approaching day, the star’s “heraldic fire” does not “speak of approaching morn with joy to [her]” (11-12). The light is now “Quench’d in the gloom of death,” though it once was there, as she describes, “to light [her] on [her] thorny way” (13-14). Robinson’s mariner rejoices at dawn because it promises a break in his suffering, but Smith’s speaker has no such hope. She has lost all confidence that a new day will bring joy or the cessation of pain.

Smith was no stranger to physical pain. She dealt with worsening arthritis as she aged, and her poetic project as a whole is evidence of her deep despair.37 As Andrew Solomon writes of depression, “all that is happening in the present is the anticipation of pain in the future” (29).

37 In *The Collected Letters of Charlotte Smith*, Judith Philips Stanton notes how Smith’s arthritis affected her hands, which made it difficult for her to write at times; she also suggests that Smith’s “depression could have increased her pain and the frequency of flare-ups” (106).
When someone is depressed, “the past and future are absorbed entirely by the present moment…You cannot remember a time when you felt better…and you certainly cannot imagine a future time when you will feel better” (Solomon 55). Smith’s speaker has nothing to look forward to, cannot imagine a future devoid of “gloom,” and has no faith that the passage of time will somehow bring relief. The only thing she expects is that every day will bring fresh pain. She even refers to her life before she was so severely depressed as her “thorny way,” which shows that her despair is not a result of an easy, pain-free life now turned to one of hardship. She knows adversity and pain intimately, but it appears that while she once had some hope for a reprieve, that conviction is gone. “Quench’d in the gloom of death” also highlights her suicidal ideation, that her mind is so fixated on death that it has incapacitated what used to help guide her through depressive episodes.

Though she may not see an end to her suffering, the end of her sonnet, at least, provides some sense of closure. In The Development of the Sonnet, Michael Spiller reminds us that the sonnet “ends at a point not controlled by the author’s will” (2). There is a sense of safety and security in knowing that the poem, and thus the poet’s description and projection of pain, has an eventual endpoint, that it will not and cannot continue indefinitely. Spiller argues that the sonnet “preemptively solves two problems: proportion and extension” (3). The poet in pain must find a way to condense that pain, to articulate it in an effective way, within the tight-knit space of fourteen lines. Even if the sonnet is saturated with pain, there is no threat of that pain spilling over. In some ways, the anticipation of the poem’s end might mirror Smith’s speaker’s
hopelessness. The pain she expects is perpetual, just as the sonnet’s structure is static. But if Smith struggles with the weight of her depression, the sonnet can provide a “habitation of mediated definiteness, a proportioned mental space, a literary matrix by which to order [her] experience during composition,” as Alistair Fowler characterizes poets’ use of different genres (31). It is still the poet’s job, of course, to inhabit and fill that space, but there is a sense of stability in having a fixed form to follow. The strictures of the sonnet allows the poet the freedom to fill it with what might feel like unwieldy chaos or overwhelming emotions. If the rhyme scheme, meter, and length are already set before the composition of the poem begins, then the poet is—perhaps paradoxically—free to expel whatever pain they want, knowing that it will be corralled by the boundaries of the sonnet.

This is why the sonnet is such an effective tool for expressing suicidality. Chronic physical and mental pain are out of one’s control and often control one’s life. The sonnet’s rules provide their own control, but in a way that the poet can rely on. Smith’s speaker, whose former guiding light now brings only gloom, may wish her life could end just as the sonnet inevitably ends. Conveying her intimate feelings of despair in the poem’s final lines might somehow simulate that. Deborah Kennedy suggests that Smith might have “maintained her mental health by articulating her discontent in her poetry” (47). Part of her pain management regimen, it seems, was writing poetry, and constructing sonnets was one way to safely satisfy her suicidal urges.

38 Smith is known for playing with and innovating the sonnet form, and her sonnets do not always conform exactly, but they are always fourteen lines and almost always in strict iambic pentameter.
Just as Robinson addresses her health in “Ode to Health,” Bannerman interrogates her pain in “Ode to Pain.” She first invokes her pain—“Hail!”—and then begins to characterize it: “fiercest herald of a power, / Whose harsh controul each nerve obeys!” (66). Her pain is a tyrant, a dictator imposing total control, and every fiber and nerve ending is at its mercy. Its “keen and cruel chains / Corrode” her body and mind (67). Even though her voice is made “feeble” by pain, she nevertheless raises it to call out to pain, to question it (66). She asks, “…dost thou never, never mourn, / To plant so deep the hidden thorn, / Forbidding aid, and blasting rest?” (66). Is pain aware of the harm it is causing her? Does it not feel guilty for dispensing such intense pain, pain that is not only sharp and unrelenting but also invisible? Her pain is also all-consuming; she feels it “every vein,” and, while it is around, she wonders if “pleasure [will] never smile again, / Or health thro’ ev’ry channel swell” (67). She, too, describes its effects on perception. “The wretch, who sees thy figure, Pain,” she writes, “For ever sleet before his eyes; / For him, no glories gild the skies; / No beauties shine in nature’s bound” (67). As such an intrusive force, pain completely alters her interactions with and interpretations of her environment. We can use Olstein’s characterization of migraine pain quoted in the previous

39 This recalls Anne Finch’s “The Spleen,” another ode in which the speaker is interrogating an oppressive force (depression, in Finch’s case). Her spleen “too much prevail[s]” (74). She feels it’s “force,” and her “verse decay[s]” under depression’s control (75, 76).
40 And this evokes Thomas Gray’s “Sonnet” (on the death of Richard West): “In vain to me the smileing Mornings shine, / And redning Phæbus lifts his golden Fire; / The Birds in vain their amorous Descant joyn; / Or chearful Fields resume their green Attire” (Thomas Gray’s Commonplace Book, vol. 1, pg. 284).
chapter—how it is “a space you enter and are enveloped by”—to help us understand how pain becomes a lens through which one sees (142). When pain envelopes, when it is “fe[lt] in every vein,” as Bannerman writes, it is impossible to see clearly, to gaze and observe unaffected by its influence. Anne Finch tells her spleen, “Thro’ thy black Jaundies I all Objects see” (line 77). Her depression is an infectious disease distorting her perception.

If pain—in all its forms—alters and controls perception, the poet in pain is always writing pain. A poet’s landscape description, for example, will be colored by pain in some way, from the way the scene is initially observed to how it is transcribed in language and metaphor. That pain may not be directly visible to the reader on the page, but pain’s participation in the poetic process is unavoidable. In *Moral and Literary Dissertations* (1784), Thomas Percival lays out his thoughts on poetry: how it should be written, what purposes it serves, what constitutes a good poem (or what makes one image stronger than another). While his arguments are ultimately based on, and in the service of, morality, some of his ideas about landscape poetry and mimesis are relevant here. Percival often spends time juxtaposing passages from different poets, and in one such comparison he begins by quoting Lucretius, who “sanctioned the vulgar error, that, in JAUNDICE, objects are painted on the retina of the same colour with that which tinges the external coat of the eye” (47). After quoting similar poetic depictions of jaundice from Pope and Hayley, he states that he is “inclined to believe there is no sufficient foundation for this opinion…their relation [jaundice and similarly colored perception] is neither confirmed by experience, nor consonant to reason” (248). This is problematic for Percival because he believes that the poet who is knowledgeable about science, and whose poetry is then informed by science, can “embellish” poetry properly (288). He favors factual accuracy in poetry. But what Percival
fails to see, or perhaps purposefully ignores, is both the value of metaphor and the ways in which our individual experiences affect what we see and, in turn, how we represent them on paper. The metaphor of jaundice extending to eyesight is ripe for describing pain’s virulence. It also values individual perspective, specifically a woman’s perspective in Finch’s case. The point is not whether the description is based in science but that it reflects Finch’s own experience with depression.

Gillian Rose’s landmark text, *Feminism and Geography*, deconstructs the pervasive masculinist perspective in geography studies—in part, how men are the ones gazing (and thus geography studies are written from a masculine viewpoint in masculine language) and women are the ones gazed upon. At one point she analyzes an eighteenth-century landscape portrait painting, Gainsborough’s “Mr and Mrs Andrews” (1750), and notes the difference in body language and positioning in the painting. “If Mr. Andrews seems at any moment able to stride off into the vista, Mrs. Andrews looks planted to the spot,” Rose explains (93). Not only is the male perspective given precedence in terms of geographical practice, but they also have freedom to explore within the landscape; women’s voices, on the other hand, are excluded from geographical discourse, and they are represented as passive (in landscape art, in this case). The poets in this thesis, in a sense, work against these masculinist ideals and strictures by writing from their own perspectives. They are not gazed upon but are gazing upon the seascapes before

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41 Because nature, as Rose reminds us, has long been associated with the feminine, e.g., “Mother Nature” (69).
42 Mr. Andrews is shown standing next to a tree, dog at his feet, while Mrs. Andrews is sitting on a bench in front of the tree to the point that she “is painted almost as part of that still and exquisite landscape” (93).
them. Their use of the lyric “I” inherently privileges their perspective, and often that perspective is one of pain.

Kathryn King reminds us that “women of the eighteenth century challenge constructions of the feminine simply by writing poems that give voice to their own wishes, feelings, desires. The very act of taking up the daring pen…breaks up the traditional alignment between feminine passivity and silence” (441). And while it is true that women have also been criticized for only having the ability to write what they know and have been unjustly associated with emotions rather than logic, these women poets are not only taking up the pen, but using that pen to articulate their intimate struggles in verse. Rose identifies landscape’s meaning, “whether written or painted, grown or built,” as built upon “the cultural codes of the society for which it was made” (89). We can, for example, read the “cultural codes” of eighteenth-century society and literary landscape in the poems of this thesis (e.g., the ways in which discussing suicidal ideation would not have been socially acceptable and, thus, how Robinson keeps her speakers at more of a distance to maintain her reputation). We can look at the use of the sonnet, a historically male-dominated form, and how these women are marshaling it for their own purposes. But we can also put Rose’s landscape definition in the context of what we discussed in Chapter Two: pain and perception. The landscapes the poet builds (via their perception and poetic representation) are encoded in their pain. Likewise, the suicidal poet constructs landscapes saturated in death and despair as their hopelessness is mapped out in their internal and external geographies.

In addition to applying Rose’s ideas about landscape to my focus on perception, we can apply Melody Jue’s engagement with “ocean humanities” or “blue humanities” to pain
perception. Instead of using the ocean “as a discrete object of analysis,” Jue aims to demonstrate “how to think through seawater” (16). The ocean becomes, itself, a lens through which to analyze and interpret the world around us, which provides “an epistemological check on human knowledge formation, presenting entirely different conditions for perception, sensations…” (Jue 10). The person in pain has no choice but to think through their pain and, therefore, to interact with and understand their environment through pain’s frame. Using the ocean as a method of inquiry rather than an object of study also speaks to the ways in which the experiences of both physical and mental pain are intensely personal and cannot even begin to be understood without subjective perspectives. Jue also quotes Rachel Carson, who wrote that, to begin to “sense” the space of the ocean, “we must shed our human perceptions of length and breadth and time and place” (Jue 4). This necessary altering of perceptions—of entirely reorienting oneself—echoes Olstein’s depiction of the pain state as almost an entirely new plane of existence (142). Applied to suicidality, it might also suggest that a specialized, personalized lexicon is required to convey it. As Shniedman argues in the *Suicidal Mind*, the best way to understand suicide is “through the study of human emotions described…in the words of the suicidal person” (6). “It is the words that suicidal people say,” he writes, “…that make up the essential vocabulary of suicide” (viii). Suicidality is first and foremost a highly individualized experience, so much so that it can only begin to be understood or “seen” through the lens, the language, of the suicidal person.

43 Jue highlights what she calls the “terrestrial bias” within environmental humanities and critical thought in general (XI). She defines the “emergent field” of ‘blue humanities’ as a mode of study that “turns to the world’s oceans as environments for scholarly inquiry, challenging the assumption that saving the environment means being concerned with forests” (XI).
In this chapter, I look at sonnets by Anne Bannerman, Mrs. B[arbara] Finch, and Charlotte Smith, paying particular attention to the poems’ settings. How do these poets use the landscape, and how might the natural world serve as both a space and a place to grapple with and externalize their ambivalence towards life? Why is the sea an especially apt location for situating suicidality? The introduction to *Emotional Geographies* describes how “an emotional geography…attempts to understand emotion…in terms of its socio-*spatial* mediation and articulation rather than its entirely interiorised subjective mental states” (Bondi, et al. 3). With that in mind, I aim to investigate the link between seascapes and emotions and how we might glean a deeper, more complex understanding of these poets’ pain by attending to the environments in and through which they are articulating that pain.

Bannerman’s sonnet “To the Ocean” plays with appearances, with what is immediately visible and what is assumed or expected.44 From the poem’s “narrative” to its rhyme scheme and sound, it challenges expectations. In doing so, it challenges our understanding of invisible pain. Its rhyme scheme seems to be one of Bannerman’s own creation—ABAB CDCD DEDEAA—and the first stanza alone already highlights its complexity:

> Hush’d are thy stormy waves, tempestuous main!
> Light o’er thy surface sports the genial air!
> Ah! Who would think, that danger lurks within,
> That ev’n thy murmu’ring seems to say—beware. (1-4)

It is unclear whether Bannerman intends for “main” to rhyme with “within,” and because the

44 See Appendix pg. 111.
poem’s final couplet also includes the word “main”—“Such are thy dreadful trophies, ruthless main! / What are thy triumphs—but another’s pain!”—it is hard to tell if Bannerman wanted to connect all four “A” lines or if she, perhaps, wanted to connect lines 1, 13, and 14 (and, thus, leave line 3 to stand on its own). Line 3 is about mystery—about danger furtively waiting beneath the water’s surface—so distinguishing it from not just its potential rhymed pairs but the entire poem could be Bannerman’s way of signaling the sharp contrast between the ocean’s current calm and its inevitable, or premeditated, shift to destruction. It would also subvert the reader’s expectations by breaking from the “ABAB” pattern of the typical sonnet form. The contrast between the visible water conditions and what the speaker anticipates serves as a metaphor for the “invisibility” of both physical and mental pain (and illnesses).

Without any bodily markers of pain, the person in pain often appears normal. While one may appear serene on the outside, inside their nerves may be on fire or their thoughts may be circling suicide. Sonya Huber reminds us that “chronic pain is not a missing limb or open wound,” but that it is “the essence of invisible suffering” (25). Furthermore, the envisioned discrepancy reflects the ways in which the speaker’s interior state influences how she perceives and interprets the scene before her. She is, in part, projecting her pain onto the ocean and creating a narrative for it (as is described in the following two stanzas), as a writer might invent a character’s countenance, behavior, and motivation. Her pain is also a lens through which she sees the sea to begin with. As Stephen Bending writes, “It is important to recognize that eighteenth-century accounts of landscape not only rely on the physicality and the metaphor of a point of view, but are focused sharply on the viewers’ sense of themselves and on their desires” (2). While Bannerman looks out at the ocean and surveys its countenance, she also makes it a
character, which is unavoidably influenced by her emotions and her bodily and mental experience. This is played out in the rest of the poem, as Bannerman melds her extempore observations and her memories of past pain.

Stanza two tracks the speaker’s altered interaction with the sea, how her past and current experiences with despair color her vision:

To my corroded mind, destructive deep!

Thy smiling aspect only brings despair,

Reminds me, when the angry whirlwinds sweep

Along thy bosom, now so calm, so fair. (5-8)

Not only has her depression transformed her very perception, but it has also begun to destroy her mind. Like the repetitive violence of crashing waves eroding shore and cliff, her pain disintegrates her brain. “Mind” might imply brain function (e.g., her ability to think clearly; to write well, or at all; her ability to process new information and separate her melancholic mood from reality), but it likely also implies the state of her mind (e.g., her suicidality). To such an afflicted mind, the light refracted on the ocean’s surface is but a veneer for/of the dark dangers lying in wait. While she is able to notice the sea’s “smiling aspect”—how she assumes it looks to someone whose mind has not been worn down by pain—it brings no attendant joy or complacency. Someone else might reciprocate the ocean’s welcoming, friendly look, but the speaker greets it with despondency. She knows that the ocean’s “smiling” is only temporary, for looking at its calm surface only reminds her of the tempests she has witnessed (and felt) before. There is no escape, no relief, from her pain experience.

Like the kind of tunnel vision that comes along with suicidality, and how, especially
chronic, pain (which Bannerman seems to have suffered from) exists outside typical time and space, the speaker is stuck in the feedback loop of her despair. This is reinforced by the pronoun repetition at the beginning of the lines of stanza two—where line 5 includes “my,” line 6 “thy,” line 7 “me,” and line 8 “thy.”45 While not a perfect pattern, the switch from the speaker to the ocean and back again still mirrors the undulation of waves. And waves are one of the most cyclic forces. Bachelard writes that “water is the truly transitory element,” but despite its constant state of “flux,” it “always flows, always falls, always ends in horizontal death” (12). Waves are created by water in flux, and, though waves are constantly in motion, their movements are predictable. The waves will ebb, and then flow, and then ebb again. And though all forms of pain might come in waves—might be debilitating one day and manageable the next—pain is persistent nevertheless. “[T]he pain of water is infinite;” Bachelard reminds us (12). In “Poetics of Pain,” Kate Bodger describes chronic pain as a “state,” because it “has no end, no other side” and because “temporality loses its meaning.” Chronic pain, like chronic suicidality, is experienced as a permanent state—partially because, in the throes of it, all that exists is pain. Pain demands to be felt, and at its most severe, infiltrates every fiber and nerve ending. The pain-free, able-bodied, un-depressed self is a stranger. By definition, of course, chronic pain is persistent and unabating. It feels never-ending because, often, there is no end-point, but, instead, a lifelong condition to manage.

Stanza three of the poem reinforces the connection between memory and pain, as its first fourth lines recount storm the speaker witnessed once before:

45 We see a similar pattern in line twelve, “And smil’st delighted in a scene so dark,” where the “s,” “d,” “s,” “d” pattern is repeated.
Reminds me, when, unpitying and untrue,

On the sunk rock thou driv’st the fated bark,

Whelms’t in thy wat’ry breast the luckless crew,

And smil’st delighted in a scene so dark. (9-12)

After noticing how the wind across the ocean is “calm” and “fair,” the speaker is immediately reminded of a tempest that drove a boat and its crew to their deaths. The disparity between what she is witnessing and the chaos she not only remembers but knows intimately is what makes her interaction with the sea so fraught. Destruction is familiar; even death feels familiar. Pain has its own muscle memory, and neither the body nor the mind forgets its past. Our past hurts are, in a sense, inscribed on our individual landscapes, mapped onto us.\(^{46}\) Bannerman’s “To the Ocean” serves as a map of accrued despair, each stanza working together to create a topography of pain.

Another one of Bannerman’s sonnets, “To the Owl,” utilizes the seascape as a backdrop for her suicidal ideation.\(^{47}\) The speaker first professes her love to the “cheerless, melancholy bird” (line 1). “Soothing to me is thy funereal cry; / Here build thy lonely nest, and ever nigh / My dwelling, be thy sullen wailings heard,” she continues (2-4). References to death saturate the poem, and beginning in this first stanza we see the speaker aligning herself with the owl (more specifically with its plaintive cries). She finds peace and a sense of camaraderie with its “lonely nest” by her “dwelling.” Connections with sound continue in the next stanza:

Amid the howlings of the northern blast,

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\(^{46}\) My thinking around this is, in part, informed by Bessel van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps Score* (2014). Dr. Van de Kolk details the ways in which trauma actually alters brain and body chemistry and, thus, affects how individuals take in and respond to stimuli, process emotions, engage interpersonally, etc.

\(^{47}\) See Appendix pg. 112.
Thou lov’st to mingle thy discordant scream,
Which to the visionary mind may seem
To call the sufferer to eternal rest. (4-8)

Now the owl’s “discordant scream” mixes with the “howlings” of the wind, orchestrating a symphony of despair. But the owl’s vocalizations also function as a siren song of sorts. A “visionary mind” is one “affected by phantoms” and “disposed to receive impressions on the imagination,” according to Johnson’s Dictionary. And while the subject of lines 7 and 8 is vague (who has “the visionary mind,” and who is “the sufferer”?), it seems likely that the speaker is referencing herself. Already under melancholy’s sway, she could be easily lured by suicide’s song. In “The Spleen” Finch describes the hallucinatory effects of her depression:

Thy fond delusions, cheat the Eyes,
Before them, antick Spects dance,
Unusual fires, their pointed heads advance,
And airy Phantoms rise. (16-19)

Finch seems to be documenting a state of what we today might call psychosis (seeing forms that are not actually there, blurred lines between delusion and reality). It is not uncommon for those struggling with depression to experience such symptoms, but the kind of “phantasmic” effect Bannerman is writing about can also be read more metaphorically. Depression, as an illness, plays tricks on the mind—casting its dreary light over everything. William Styron writes that those “in the grip of depression at its ghastliest” behave as if they are in a “state of unrealistic hopelessness, torn by exaggerated ills and fatal threats that bear no resemblance to actuality” (76). The state of despair feels permanent, and death presents itself as an escape from the pain.
Like the Sirens were known to tempt sailors to destruction, depression can sing a seductive song of suicide.

We can also think of the poet as a siren figure, or the poem as a siren song. One of Bannerman’s ode’s, “The Mermaid,” is written in first-person from the point of view of the mermaid who, stuck lamenting the loss of her lover, decides to turn herself into a siren (“I pour the syren-song of woe”) (22). Sunk in grief, she tells us that her “heart” and “soul, / Retain no more their former glow,” and now she “watch[es] the bark” to then “lure the sailor to his doom” (24-25). “The Mermaid" has many layers of meaning, but at its core it is a tale of regained agency. When she is dealt a hand of despair, the speaker turns her fate back on itself and starts dealing in destruction. Wholly altered by her despair, she puts her new biology to good use, or at least productive use (as far as she’s concerned), part of which comes into play in the creation of the poem itself. Instead of her despair existing as a siren song—something tempting her toward death—she becomes a siren. The poem, then, is her song.

“To the Owl” functions similarly. The poem is especially focused on sounds, of the bird, the wind, the waves, and the final couplet zeroes in on the noises: "Hark! loud, and louder still, the tempest raves;— / And still I hear thee from the dizzy steep” (lines 13-14). The intensity of both the storm and the owl's "discordant scream" continuously builds across the poem, yet the speaker remains invested in listening at the end. And if we think, as Emily Wilson does in the introduction to her translation of the Odyssey, about the fact that “the temptation offered by the Sirens is to listen forever,” it seems like the speaker is drawn to the owl because it matches her internal state (68). "Soothing to me is thy funereal cry," she tells the “melancholy bird” (2, 1). Maybe the speaker is tempted to listen to the owl's song forever, or maybe she is tempted to hear
its cry as a call "to eternal rest." In writing the poem, however, she is turning that (at least potential) destruction back on itself and giving it a "safe" (non-deadly) container. It is also important to note that part of the Sirens’ lure is their wealth of knowledge.\(^{48}\) By listening to the Sirens for eternity, Odysseus could come to have “a full and complete understanding of what happened in the war and what it meant” (Wilson 68). Those who are depressed, and particularly suicidally depressed, are often stuck in a constant loop of their own unhappiness along with existential questioning and dread. One might ask, “Is it all worth it? Amidst all the pain, is staying alive worthwhile?” And the voice of depression, at “its ghastliest,” to use Styron’s words, answers back “no” (76). Odysseus, however, decides to use some safety precautions while encountering the Sirens. He fills his crewmates’ ears with wax so they will be “barred” from the song—”The wax dissolv’d beneath the burning ray! / Then ev’ry ear I barr’d against the strain, / And from access of phrenzy lock’d the brain”—and he has himself tied up to the ship’s mast so he can only listen to the song temporarily—”Now round the mast my mates the fetters roll’d, / And bound me limb by limb, with fold on fold.”\(^{49}\) Essentially, Odysseus gives himself a taste of temptation. He allows himself to flirt with destruction, but in a deliberate, controlled way.

What is writing a sonnet about suicidal ideation if not an act of flirting with death? We can think of Bannerman’s sonnet like Odysseus’s journey through siren-infested waters. The act

\(^{48}\) It is also worth noting that the goddess Athena, who serves as Odysseus’s guide throughout the *Odyssey*, is associated with the owl. Pope notes this in volume three of his *Odyssey* translation: “the owl [was sacred] to Pallas” (149). We can think of Athena as the medium through which Odysseus comes to knowledge as Homer and Bannerman are the mediums through which the reader obtains knowledge. 

\(^{49}\) From Alexander Pope’s *The Odyssey of Homer, vol. 2* Book Twelve, lines 211-215, pg. 321.
of transcribing her experience in poetry is her version of fastening herself to a ship’s mast, her way of mediating the threat of suicidality while still allowing herself to obtain and express knowledge (knowledge that she is then able to impart onto the reader). At the same time, we must remember that the “knowledge” Bannerman—or anyone—receives from suicidal depression is tainted, infected like the “black Jaundies” of Finch’s spleen (line 77). A suicide siren is particularly dangerous, then, because its song is deceptive and deceitful, yet alluring nonetheless.

In *Fatal Women in Romanticism*, Adriana Craciun discusses the siren figure in Bannerman in depth, but she also analyzes a Leticia Landon poem that both features siren characters and references Homer directly. Craciun cites one of Landon’s footnotes, in which she “explains the sirens’ function in *The Odyssey*”: “‘we, say the Sirens, but it is Homer, the one Homer, who speaks’” (201). If we apply that same idea to Bannerman’s sonnet, it is the owl that cries and the winds that howl, but it is the *speaker* who gives them voice and space on the page. In that way, the speaker is exerting control over the clearly chaotic natural scene and control over their effects on her and her psyche.

Bannerman continues in this imaginary vein in the third stanza:

And sometimes, with the Spirit of the deep,
Thou swell’st the roarings of the stormy waves;
While, rising shroudless from their wat’ry graves,
Aerial forms along the billows sweep. (9-12)

Again, the owl’s sounds are conjoined with the noises of the storm, the “roarings of the stormy waves,” but the speaker also describes some ethereal “forms” she sees. Perhaps this is a symptom of her depression, but the language used to characterize the imaginary figures she sees is important. Like the first two stanzas, stanza three is also saturated with death.

We can juxtapose “To the Owl” with one of Bannerman’s odes, “The Spirit of the Air.” Whereas the sonnet’s speaker references the “Spirit of the deep,” the speaker of Bannerman’s ode is the “spirit of the air” herself. Given agency and the power of destruction, the speaker takes the form of the tempest. The poem begins with the “Spirit” telling the “angry winds, that sweep, / Resistless, o’er the polar coast: / Thou swell’est no more, tremendous deep” to “Be hush’d” because she “lock[s] the[m] in eternal frost” (1-4). Throughout the ode, the speaker finds joy and satisfaction in the violence she reaps on the mariners who brave the waters. She, then, addresses them directly:

Soft be your bed, and sweet your rest,
Ye luckless tenants of the deep!
And, o’er each cold and shroudless breast,
May spirits of the waters weep! (71-74)

While there seem to be imaginary forms “rising shroudless from their wat’ry graves” in “To the Owl” (line 11), here the “tenants of the deep” are actual dead bodies, laid to rest on the ocean’s floor. The speaker even tells us, “My harp shall join in solemn strains; / My voice shall echo to the waves, / That dash above your coral graves,” which reminds us of how the owl’s “discordant scream” entwines with the “howlings of the northern blast” (59; lines 5-6). Bannerman’s use of “shroudless” in each poem is interesting, though. Being bereft of a burial cloth could denote an
improper burial (which, given a more literal reading of the ode, makes sense because the bodies were not afforded a burial at all, only a journey to the bottom of the sea). “Shroudless” also means uncovered, unhidden. There’s a nearness to death in these poems. Bannerman blurs the boundaries between life and death, and the repeated grave imagery throughout her work evokes the kind of living death Cowper writes about: “I, fed with judgments, in a fleshly tomb, am / Buried above ground” (lines 19-20).

There’s a through line of what Matthew Heilman calls “suicidal fatalism” in Bannerman’s Poems (lx), and, while most of her poems are melancholic in mood and tone, the stark suicidality of her speakers is evidenced by direct discussions of death. In “To the Cypress,” the speaker enjoys watching the wind blow “thro’ the long grass, that shrouds the lonely grave,” and she hopes that “when the turf shall on [her] bosom rest” the trees will still “murmur” (lines 1, 12-13).51 She finds the wind blowing through the trees soothing, but she also takes comfort in imagining herself dead and buried in the earth. “Sonnet VIII” asks, “Is there a spot, in Nature’s wide domain, / Where peace delights her fair abode to rear? / Where the sad heart shall never sigh again…?” (1-3).52 There is such a spot, “one sure asylum from corroding care,” the speaker tells us: “the grave” (8, 12). Amidst the “wint’ry wind” and “beat[ing] rain,” the speaker looks on the tomb’s “grassy roof” and exclaims, “if still there’s peace for me, / That I that envied tenant soon may be!” (9-10, 14). It’s crucial for the speaker that she finds peace in both nature and death, specifically a mingling of the two. We can think about the concept of liminality, which Jacky Bowring defines as “the times and spaces of transition, threshold places,” in relation

51 See Appendix pg. 113.
52 See Appendix pg. 114.
to the landscape Bannerman evokes (99). Bowring argues that “the invocation of death in a beautiful landscape heightens feelings of liminality, of passages and thresholds” (100). Enveloped in despair and “by woes oppress’d,” the speaker finds herself in a kind of limbo (line 5). She only finds comfort in death, and the closest she can get to it—proximally—is a graveyard. Imagining herself lying in one of the graves serves the same purpose as Bannerman writing poems to expel her suicidal ideation without having to attempt suicide. Standing on the threshold between life and death, she can safely imagine herself as a “slumb’ring tenant of the grave” (12). And, importantly, she utilizes both the natural landscape and the space of the poem to do so. Landscape “holds within it the natural habitat for melancholy, as the locus of places of contemplation, memory, death, sadness,” and it provides a productive space within which to think and a space to think through (Bowring 4).

Mrs. B[arbara] Finch and Charlotte Smith use similar grave imagery in their sonnets, “Sonnet XX” and “Written in the church-yard at Middleton in Sussex,” respectively. B. Finch’s speaker wishes for a storm because a “tranquil scene” does not “Accor[d] with anguish so severe as [hers]” (line 7).53 A “blast so keen / That rudely rages round some sea-beat shore; / The dashing billow, and the roaring wave” would be a much better fit for her mental state (8-10). But the speaker longs for most of all is

a quiet grave,

Where the afflicted heart shall throb no more:

But each dark cloud of human sorrow past,

53 See Appendix pg. 115.
The suff‘ring spirit rest in peace at last. (11-14)

Like Bannerman’s speaker, the true respite she knows and longs for is death. B. Finch utilizes an imagined seascape to situate her suicidal ideation. Smith’s poem is also set in a sort of liminal space, but hers is between the land and the sea, as well as between life and death.

Looking out at the ocean, Smith’s speaker describes the storm’s mounting intensity: “The sea no more its swelling surge confines, / But o’er the shrinking land sublimely rides” (lines 3-4). The storm itself is forcing a blurring of boundaries as the waves start to invade the landscape.

Smith includes a footnote that describes the history of the church-yard:

Middleton is a village on the margin of the sea, in Sussex, containing only two or three houses. There were formerly several acres of ground between its small church and the sea, which now, by its continual encroachments, approaches within a few feet of this half-ruined and humble edifice. The wall, which once surrounded the church-yard, is entirely swept away, many of the graces broken up, and the remains of the bodies interred washed into the sea; whence human bones are found among the sand and shingles on the shore. (42)

The “church-yard” functions as a liminal space. No longer contained within its former barriers, its geography extends to (and into) the sea. Its “half-ruined” structure also evokes the idea of the “fragment” in relation to landscape theory. Bowring tells us that the “fragment provokes melancholic contemplation, as the beholder mentally reconstructs that which is no longer whole,” and ruins (a “subspecies” of the fragment) are “suspended within the ambivalence of melancholy” (109). What is interesting about Smith’s choice of the Middleton “half-ruin” as her poem’s setting is that she does not use her sonnet to “mentally reconstruct” what the church-yard
used to look like (though she does dedicate space to that in her footnote); she, instead, uses it to imagine a specific storm that permanently alters its “humble edifice.” The church-yard still provides an apt location for imaginative creation, though, because its liminality matches the speaker’s equally ambivalent state. As mentioned in my first chapter, Jamison reminds us that “Ambivalence saturates the suicidal act” (39), and this now “swept away” spot becomes an ideal location for contemplating such an act.

As the tempest rages, the “wild blast, rising from the Western cave, / Drives the huge billows from their heaving bed” (lines 6-7). Echoing Bannerman’s grave imagery, the speaker describes more of the storm’s destruction, as it “Tears from their grassy tombs the village dead, / And breaks the silent sabbath of the grave!” (7-8). The alliteration in line 7—“the” and “their,” “huge” and “heaving,” and “billows” and “bed”—mirrors the undulation of waves. At least in this line, Smith seems to be using the alliteration to exert some form of control over the completely chaotic scene she is describing. “T” is repeated four times in the following line, but its repetition adds a choppiness, like short and choppy waves rather than smooth undulating ones. “Silent sabbath” in line 9 puts the alliteration in the middle of the line instead of spread out across it in the previous two. Smith maintains a sense of organized chaos as she details her blended setting, the borderland of the land and sea. Of the “edge of the sea,” Rachel Carson writes that it has always “been an area of unrest” (14). “Always the edge of the sea remains an elusive and indefinable boundary,” she tells us (14). Forever a place of movement and flux, the sea is constantly changing its mind, perpetually rising and receding. A storm is the sea’s fluidity on steroids. In Smith’s sonnet, there is not even an “elusive” boundary between the water and the land; there simply is no boundary at all.
The speaker notes what she sees as the waves have washed away the church-yard graves:

“Their bones whiten in the frequent wave” (9-10). Not only have parts of the landscape merged with the ocean, but the human remains are “mingled” with the sea debris. The skeletons are clothed in the shells and seaweed, decorated in marine life. And with some of the bones on the shore and some still swimming amongst the current, there is no end in sight, no time when, say, all the bones will have washed ashore and lay scattered across the rocks and sand. But the speaker has an end in mind, which plays out across the poem’s final three lines: “They hear the warring elements no more: / While I am doom’d—by life’s long storm opprest, / To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest” (12-14). The speaker resents the “village dead” and craves the state of oblivion they find in death. There is no relief, however, in imagining herself as a mere skeleton, her scattered bones bobbing in the waves, because such an escape is unavailable to her. Samuel Rowe notes the speaker’s “disaffiliation with the dead" in the poem's final couplet: “Rather than immersing itself in the grim scene it witnesses, the lyric subject articulates itself as an excluded remainder” (8). Again, there is a sense of ambivalence. Though the speaker is clear that she would rather be a pile of bones swimming in the sea, she ultimately differentiates herself from the unearthed graves. She uses her vantage point—both spatially (looking out at sea) and imaginatively (constructing a poem)—to traverse the thresholds between land and sea, life and death, reality and fiction. “Doom’d” can be read as an affirmation of the future. She recognizes that she will always long for death, that she is condemned to live a life she does not want; at the same time, she realizes that her life, even imbued with suffering, is obligatory. Admitting that she is fated to endure a life of yearning for the release of death is also a proclamation of survival, an agreement to stay—to choose life—regardless of the mental
anguish she must weather. The poem, then, serves as a vessel, a place for Smith to store her desire for death, perhaps especially because she chooses not to act on her impulses.

Coda

Smith’s “Written at Bristol in the summer of 1794” provides a commentary on both mental and physical suffering and nature and imagination’s roles in alleviating them. In Seeing Suffering in Women’s Literature of the Romantic Era, Elizabeth Dolan tells us that Smith traveled to Bath to “treat both rheumatism and the ill effects of anxiety,” and months after her arrival, her daughter, who had also fallen ill, was sent to the Bristol hot wells for treatment (103). Smith’s sonnet “portrays a chronically ill person who seeks healing in the warm baths” (Dolan 103). The first four lines encapsulate the speaker’s pain and her expectation of recovery:

Here from the restless bed of lingering pain
The languid sufferer seeks the tepid wave,
And feels returning health and hope again
Disperse “the gathering shadows of the grave!” (1-4)

Chronic pain and illness are especially relevant here, as the diction suggests an experience of persistent, unrelenting pain. Her “lingering” pain deprives her of sleep, stability, and strength, and she turns to the healing properties of warm water. “The gathering shadows of the grave” is from a line of William Hayley’s 1780 poem “Epistle to a Friend, on the Death of John
Smith’s decision to reference a poem about death underscores the persistent presence of pain in her life. As the speaker seeks “health and hope,” mortality is at the forefront of her mind, both as a looming consequence of untreatable or incurable illness and a potentially welcomed escape from despair.

Nature itself is looked upon as a means of healing in the next four lines:

And here romantic rocks that boldly swell,
Fringed with green woods, or stain’d with veins of ore,
Call’d native Genius forth, whose Heav’n-taught skill
Charm’d the deep echoes of the rifted shore. (5-8)

The scene Smith paints is particularly picturesque: jagged rocks juxtaposed with verdant trees. Engaging with such a landscape could easily evoke feelings of both awe and terror, and, while nature is clearly serving as inspiration of this sonnet, Smith also highlights its effects on other poets. Stuart Curran tells us that “Call’d native Genius forth” is, in part, a reference to “Thomas Chatterton, who died a suicide in 1770” (56). Though the “green woods” are useful in provoking poetic imagination, how far does that provocation extend? If Smith wrote these lines with Chatterton in mind, she is questioning the limits of the natural world as a sustainable source

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54 “Thy firmer soul, with Christian strength renew’d, / Nor lost in langour, nor by pain subdued, / (…) With awe, but not as Superstition’s slave, / Survey’d the gathering shadows of the grave” (185-190).
55 In his 2005 ODNB entry on Chatterton, Nick Groom concludes that Chatterton “died from an accidental overdose of arsenic and opium,” though “the archetypal nature of the myth of Chatterton’s suicide is almost impossible to deny” (11). Only centuries later was the accepted cause of death recognized as an accidental overdose. In the eighteenth-century, however, Smith would have understood Chatterton’s death as a suicide.
of poetic imagination. Even if Chatterton was able to “charm” the landscape in his poetry, it was not enough to save him from suicide.

Smith continues to question nature’s influence on “Health” and “Hope” in the poem’s sestet:

But tepid waves, wild scenes, or summer air,
Restore they palsied Fancy, woe-deprest?
Check they the torpid influence of Despair,
Or bid warm Health re-animate the breast;
Where Hope’s soft visions have no longer part,
And whose sad inmate is—a broken heart? (9-14)

How do the elements hold up against dejection, the speaker wonders? When “Fancy” is paralyzed by sorrow and the poet is languished by despair, does the landscape provide enough lifeforce to curb those effects? Dolan argues that Smith’s speaker “concludes…that none of these healing alternatives…ha[ve] the power to alleviate her depressed spirit,” but I think it is important to note that the sonnet never offers a definitive conclusion (104). The last six lines are made up of two questions, neither of which are answered. Though the speaker’s questions are rhetorical, and though Smith is clearly lamenting the inefficacy of these “healing alternatives,” the poem nevertheless ends with a question mark. Her questions highlight her frustrations, but they also leave a door open. The poem ends with a kind of suspended action. Much like the inertia Smith assigns as a symptom of despair, the sonnet itself is stuck in a state of stasis because the questions posed are left forever unresolved. This feedback loop is as much a rhetorical move made for the reader as it is a psychological tool for the speaker and Smith
herself. Perhaps one day the landscape will “re-animate” the speaker. Based on the very existence of the poem, who is to say that the “tepid waves” did not play a part in energizing Smith’s imagination? That possibility is left open by the poem’s lack of resolution.

Another of Smith’s sonnets, “Sonnet XL,” employs the interrogative to contemplate nature’s power to provide “rest” and “repose” (7, 8). The poem begins by describing an especially serene seascape—how “the low, retiring tide, / In distant murmurs hardly seems to flow” and “o’er the world of waters, blue and wide, / The sighing summer-wind forgets to blow” (1-2, 3-4). This quiet and calm setting stands out in contrast with the more chaotic and turbulent scenes that are common in Smith’s sonnets. The tide communicates in whispers, and the wind is not howling or screeching but sighing. Even the weather is at ease. But by line 7, the speaker is scrutinizing the effects of such a serene scene on her psyche:

Alas! can tranquil nature give me rest,
Or scenes of beauty soothe me to repose?
Can the soft lustre of the sleeping main,
Yon radiant Heaven, or all creation’s charms,
“Erase the written troubles of the brain,”
Which Memory tortures, and which Guilt alarms? (7-12)

“Tranquil nature” is already in a state of “rest,” but can its peacefulness inspire a similar state of calm in the speaker? In a broader sense, Smith is grappling with the extent to which our inner worlds are products of our outer worlds. But, as I argued in Chapter Two, perception is colored

56 For example, the first two lines of “Sonnet LXVII”: “Swift fleet the billowy clouds along the sky, / Earth seems to shudder at the storm aghast.”
by pain. What stands out here is the disparity between the described calm landscape and the speaker’s troubled mind. Descriptions of the quiet shore and the hushed wind only highlight the speaker’s opposite experience, dictated by “memory” and “guilt.” While the sonnet’s final couplet ends with an exclamation point rather than a question mark—“Or bid a bosom transient quiet prove, / That bleeds with vain remorse, and unextinguish’d love!”—it is still part of the questions posed above it (13-14). Smith once again leaves the questions unanswered—though, this time, the speaker asks about herself specifically. Can nature give me respite, she wonders. The poem’s somewhat vague conclusion, then, allows for an open dialogue for the speaker, between herself and nature, herself and her imagination, herself and her poetry. Both “Written at Bristol” and “Sonnet XL” document their speakers’ seemingly vain struggles to find peace and health, but both also offer a space to test the power of the poetic imagination in the face of despair.

One of Margaret Holford (the elder)’s untitled sonnets echoes both the setting and situation of Smith’s “Bristol” and “Sonnet XL.” Holford published a novel in 1785 and a collection of poems in 1798, and her daughter, another Margaret Holford, was also a poet and novelist. In Holford’s poem, “Hush’d is the glade” and “the moon, serenely bright, / Pours her mild rays aslant yon hoary hill” (lines 1-2).57 “No sound pervades the tranquil ear of Night, / Save the deep murmurs of the falling rill,” the speaker tells us (2-3). The brightness of the moon’s rays “aslant” on the hill create an almost tenebristic effect, despite their “mildness.”

57 See Appendix pg. 116.
near silence of the scene heightens the drama, the contrast, of the nighttime landscape. Within the poem, this contrast continues in the change of scenery in the following four lines:

Where yon huge cliff o’erhangs the silent deep,
And o’er the wild wave bends his awful brow,
There shall my heart its mournful vigils keep,
And count the hours which steep’d in sorrow flow. (5-8)

We move from the woods to the sea, and though the ocean is “silent,” its silence is ominous rather than serene. Once the “wild wave[s]” reach the cliffs—in a similar dramatic fashion as the moon’s light reaching the hill—the silence of the “deep” is broken. And so, too, is the quietude of the speaker’s mind.

Atop the cliffs, she watches the water and allows herself to feel. She indulges her suicidal ideation as she passes the time contemplating her own mortality:

How oft have Hope and Fancy smiling strove,
O’er my sad soul to pour the balm of peace;
But Reason tore the wreath which Fancy wove,
And frowning bade the lovely syren cease;
Bade me seek comfort for my aching breast
In the cold grave, where e’en the wretched rest. (9-14)

Here, the speaker points to the role of hope and fancy as healing agents against sadness. Those roles are limited, however, by “Reason,” which disrupts the imaginative process. By aligning “Hope” and “Fancy,” Holford suggests they are one in the same; hope is a form of fantasy, and fancy is a form of faith, and neither holds up against reality. Holford complicates this further by
likening “Fancy” to a siren in line 12, but then notes that it is “Reason” that lures her to “the cold grave.” A rejection of imagination is what leads the speaker to contemplate suicide. Though, as we saw in Bannerman’s poems in Chapter Three, the poem itself functions as a sort of siren song (and an example of poetic fancy at work). It is a way for Holford to communicate her reality—the truth of her thoughts and feelings—in a way that is controlled. While a siren’s danger comes from a threat of eternal enchantment, the end of the sonnet puts a stop to the speaker’s suicidal ideation. For the purposes of the poem, the speaker is kept safe within the fourteen lines.

Gregory Orr writes of the lyric poem, “I am sustained and consoled by the knowledge that we have survived, have come through, lucid and alive, to the poem’s conclusion” (92). A sonnet expressing suicidality is evidence of survival and a testament to the power of the poetic imagination.

Elizabeth Villa-Real Gooch tackles both imaginative creation and suicidal ideation in her work. Whereas Holford is sure about fancy’s role in relieving her despair, Gooch questions the abilities of her imagination. In her sonnet “To Imagination,” she calls on it to “lend [its] aid / To clear [her] path of Sorrow’s pointed thorn” (lines 1-2). She interrogates her imagination, asking “Say, canst thou teach me to forget my grief, / And lull to rest the cries of fell Despair?” (5-6). Clearly the speaker is looking to fancy to provide not only an escape from misery but also a salve against despair. Her expectations are not met, however, as imagination’s “fleeting joys are quickly past, / And Grief returns with doubled force, to prove / That when the die of Misery is cast, / There is no cure its evils to remove” (9-12). Unlike Smith’s “Bristol” and “Sonnet XL,”

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58 See Appendix pg. 117.
the questions asked in Gooch’s poem are answered. She explicitly tells us that imagination does not cure her woes, and, in fact, leaves a harsher reality in its wake. She, instead, resolves to “patient bear / The heart’s sad wound, the unavailing tear!” (13-14). The poem does not end in hopelessness or even a longing for death, but rather a resolve to “bear” her suffering head on, without the aid of fancy.

There are several ways to interpret this last stanza. On the one hand, the speaker might be stressing the severity of her “Grief” and “Misery,” that they are simply too intense to be quelled by flights of fancy. She might also reject imagination because it obscures reality and is therefore inauthentic to her experience—which might account for the overwhelming autobiographical nature of Gooch’s work as a whole. She is most well known for her “scandalous memoirs,” a series of first-person accounts published in 1792.59 Likewise, her poems are chiefly lyrical, and many are occasional poems either written extempore or dedicated to significant people and places in her life. Though Gooch’s speaker in “To Imagination” may bid “adieu” to fancy, Gooch herself certainly does not separate herself from, or deprive herself of, her poetic imagination. Rather, she uses it to “bear” her despair (13).

But this is complicated by the role “Grief” plays in Gooch’s other poems. In the first poem of her collection, “On Studley, in Yorkshire,” Gooch reflects on the “agonizing wound / For which no palliative is found, / But Death alone can heal” (16-18).60 What exactly the “wound” the speaker is referring to is unclear, but she references “heart felt-pang[s]” as she reflects on her youth, which seem to be the result of accrued sorrow over the years (5). “Long

60 See Appendix pg. 118.
have I drank Sorrow’s wave, / And early wish’d an early grave,” the speaker tells us (19-20). She admits to feeling chronically suicidal, and the only “solitary hope” she maintains is that “Grief, though slow, is sure” (12, 14). In the context of the last line, “Grief” seems to imply death—that, though death is slow-approaching, it is inevitable. At the same time, “grief” connotes mental and physical anguish. And, as the speaker’s “sorrows” are life-long, they too are unavoidable. There is a sense of comfort in that stability, of knowing what is to come, even if it is painful.

Gooch, it appears, was no stranger to pain, “Whether brought on by Sorrow’s stings, / Or borne on Constitution’s wings,” she writes in her poem “Written in Ill Health” (3-4). When “Sickness and Disease assail,” the speaker welcomes “Grief” as a “messenger of quick relief” (2, 19-20). Overwhelmed by illness, the speaker sees death as a welcome solution. Though the poem’s title captures a time of acute sickness, we have learned from other poems that Gooch’s mental and physical struggles were chronic. In *The History of Pain*, Roselyne Rey argues that “earlier experiences of similar pains, the influence of memory which either attenuates or amplifies, or the state of mind when the pain actually occurs are all factors that modify the way we perceive and tolerate pain” (5). Gooch’s collective pain experience, accumulated throughout her life, affects how she engages with and responds to her current “cruel state” (line 14). Her ill state is colored by memory of former illnesses, and so is “always coloured by “subjective consideration” (Rey 5). The subjective piece is what is so important in discussions of pain and the lyric mode, both of which are central to my thesis as a whole. Gooch’s poems serve as apt examples.

61 See Appendix pg. 119.
Orr suggests that “human culture…evolved the personal lyric as a means of helping individuals survive the existential crises represented by extreme subjectivity,” and “this survival,” he argues, “begins when we ‘translate’ our crises into language” (4). Gooch’s “Sonnet. Supposed to Have Been Written by the Sea-Side” is a testament to this lyric-fueled survival. The poem begins at night, “When ev’ry eye is lull’d to balmy sleep, / And Nature brings to common ills relief” and the speaker can “steal unnotic’d to the craggy steep, / Think on [her] sorrows, and indulge [her] grief” (1-4). “Nature” might have a double meaning here, as the “natural” state of sleep relieves the pressures of the day. The natural world—simply being out in nature, especially in the darkness and stillness of night—also lessens the everyday tensions. Importantly, though, it is only “common ills” that receive relief. The speaker’s sorrows are not immediately remedied by sleep or nature, but in solitude and darkness she finds the space to ruminate in peace.

In the following stanza, the speaker heads to the sea-side:

From that high cliff I mark each gushing wave
That madly breaks among the rocks below;
And oft am tempted by Despair to brave,
With hasty plunge, the “element of woe.” (5-9)

As we saw in “On Studley,” the speaker discloses her suicidal ideation, but this ideation is rather close to action. Thinking about suicide, or even longing for suicide, is different from standing on the edge of cliff and contemplating jumping off of it in the moment. There is a real sense of

62 See Appendix pg. 120.
danger here, which is only amplified by the adverbs “gushing” and “madly.” Even the word “hasty” adds to the intensity of the speaker’s suicidality and the immediacy of the potential destruction.

Throughout the third stanza, the speaker details her inner conflict between hope and despair. She tells us that “Officious hope arrests [her] tortur’d mind, / Too long the victim of Suspense and Pain” (9-10). Hope does its duty in trying to stop her mind from drowning in despair, but because her pain is chronic—because “years have prov’d the flatt’ring promise vain”—she does not trust it (13). At this point in the poem, the reader’s hope might be waning alongside the speaker’s. With hope seemingly unable to pull the speaker out of her suicidal spiral, the threat of death is looming. When we get to the ending couplet, however, the speaker’s fate changes:”——I gaze with horror on the boundless main; — / My coward heart shrinks back—and trusts to Hope again” (13-14). These last lines make up their own stanza on the page, and the double em dash at the beginning of line thirteen adds another layer of separation (and suspense) between these lines and the rest of the poem. It is not hope that causes the speaker’s change of heart, though. Fear, upon looking out at the seemingly endless ocean, is what gives her pause. And because this fear coincides with the final couplet, it is as if her fear is also related to the poem coming to an end. Gooch has fourteen lines to contain her suicidality. Choosing life at the end of the poem is also choosing to trust poetry, or to maintain faith in the poetic imagination. The last line is also an alexandrine, and the extra two syllables read as both an admission of the intensity of her pain (that it is perhaps not so easily confined and resolved) and a commitment to life, to keep going. We know that the speaker has been to this same cliff before,
lost her hope and thought about diving to her death, and we know that she will likely return again in times of deep despair. Nevertheless, she agrees to stay alive, at least for the time being.

The poem’s “narrative”—stealing out to the sea cliffs in the middle of the night to think and feel freely—also functions as a metaphor for both suicidal ideation and poetic creation. While the seaside is indeed an important physical location for the speaker, her journey there can be read more abstractly. In the depths of depression, one might feel like a solitary wanderer atop a “craggy steep,” isolated and searching for relief. And the act of writing the poem, as a solitary rush to contemplate and make meaning followed by a deliberate retreat, an end, a pause, is mirrored by the speaker’s nocturnal excursion.

Mary Ruefle writes about the “event of metaphor” (131, 133). Not only is metaphor something that occurs, that happens, but it is something that “will arise and subside, like any other event” (Ruefle 134). So, too, will the speaker’s suicidality and Gooch’s sonneteering. Both are impermanent, fluctuating states, which is reinforced by the poem’s overflowing last line. The speaker’s self-destructive feelings, as well as her complicated relationship with hope and imagination, resist typical confines. They expand beyond the poem’s scope and scale, and the added syllables highlight the immediacy of the poem. Poet Lucie Brock-Broden argues that “a poem is troubled into its making,” that it is “a thing that wounds.” And in The Empathy Exams, Leslie Jamison tells us that “Wound implies en media res: the cause of the injury is past but the healing isn’t done” (194). We can think of the poem as a wound, as evidence of hurt, as an opening to both look into and out through. A wound is in the process of healing, of sewing itself back together. The sonnet is similarly dynamic as a space in which the poet is actively inspecting
and nursing her psychological wounds; the poem is a site dedicated to survival, and any action and movement implied in the healing process also implies life, resilience, and even hope. And, again, the poem’s last line—the alexandrine—suggests recovery and perseverance.

We can think of the alexandrine as a metaphor, a dedication to keep going, that applies to the work of each poet in this thesis. Alongside Smith, Wharton, Robinson, Bannerman, B[arbara] Finch, Holford, and Gooch all use their lyric voices to express, work through, and contain their pain while navigating the Georgian cultural climate. These lesser-known poets hold their own against Smith and deserve to be read in the same ways Smith is read, thanks to recent recovery work: as women adapting both the lyric mode and the sonnet for their own purposes and engaging in literary technique that blurs the boundaries of Romantic poetry. Whether the poems discussed in this thesis are examples of early Romantic poetry or are pre-romantic in their style and sentiments, they are part of the eighteenth-century poetic archive that still remains chiefly untouched. The poems of Bannerman, B[arbara] Finch, Holdford, and Gooch have yet to be transcribed and published in modern scholarly collections, and even the work of Wharton and Robinson (whose poems have been edited) remains largely inaccessible.63

Women writing in the eighteenth century were tasked with navigating a patriarchal society and an array of gendered double standards. In The Autobiographical Subject, Felicity Nussbaum reminds us that eighteenth-century women’s “selves”—legal, political, social—were

63 Wharton’s poems are collected by Germaine Greer in her self-published The Surviving Works of Anne Wharton (1997), but the book is now both outdated and out of print. Robinson’s Collected Works were published by Routledge (Vol. 1, Poems, was published in 2009) and Mary Robinson: Selected Poems was published by Broadview Press in 1999, though her poetry is rarely anthologized.
“largely subsumed within men’s” (146).64 Likewise, women’s roles were clear: “she is an inferior who yields to superior male wisdom” (Nussbaum 146). The social as well as literary landscape was steeped in misogyny, and women who chose to “attemp[t] the pen,” as Anne Finch writes in “The Introduction,” had to find their voice in a time that worked to deprive them of one (line 9). Women, Nussbaum argues, “tak[e] up the public position as subject rather than object for the first time in autobiographical writing” (152). Thinking back to de Beauvoir’s and Woolf’s ideas about women serving as looking-glasses to men, the women poets represented in this thesis use their poems as their own looking-glass, as a way to reflect their interiority back onto the page. Though not the same as a memoir or an epistle, the lyric poem, with its expectation of interiority and first-person perspective, provides a fertile space for autobiographical expression.

More specifically, the sonnet becomes a place women can encapsulate their thoughts and feelings. Not only is its strict form fitting for containing psychological chaos, but its history—including both classical and Shakespearean roots—also lends itself to safe (i.e., publishable) poetic expression. Women at the end of the eighteenth century, spurred by Smith, adopted the sonnet as a historically masculine form and fashioned it for their own purposes. The sonnet’s tradition as a space for men to communicate romantic love is usurped and, in a sense, reclaimed by women poets.65 But because the sonnet is still a well-established form with a rich literary

64 She notes how women “were excluded from the vote, and thus from the body politic” and how “women were especially likely to be among the poor and victimized” (146, 147).
65 Sonnets, of course, are not the only form that women poets used to achieve interiority, but by the end of the eighteenth century, there was a trend of sonneteering women poets. See the work of Anna Seward, Helen Maria Williams, Maria Logan, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Hester Chapone, Jane West, Miss [Mary] Locke, Anna Maria Jones, Joanna Baillie, Ann Radcliffe, and Mary Tighe.
history, it is a genre that allows women to work within the confines of patriarchal convention while simultaneously carving out their own poetic paths.

Versifying about one’s thoughts and feelings, especially those relating to suicide, did not come without risk to women poets. Their characters and reputations were on the line, but the poets discussed in this thesis found ways to communicate their pain in a publishable form. Jamison writes about the fine line between “wound dwelling” and sharing authentic experience (216). Rather than tiptoeing around her “wounds,” because female suffering is often both romanticized and patronized, Jamison chooses to disclose: “I guess I’m talking about it because it happened” (187). Living through her pain and achieving a sense of catharsis in telling her story is reason enough to share. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar take things a step further when they describe the journey of the woman writer as “her attempt to make herself whole by healing her own infections and diseases” (76). The poets in this thesis choose to make their private pain public and, in doing so, stave off suicide. Infected by despair, they use their poetry as a salve to soothe their minds.
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Appendix: Poems

Anne Wharton

On the Storm Between Gravesend and Diepe;
Made at that Time.66

When the Tempestuous Sea did foam and roar,
Tossing the Bark from the long-wish’d for Shore;
With false affected fondness it betray’d,
Striving to keep what Perish’d, if it stay’d.
Such is the Love of Impious Men, where e’re
Their cruel Kindness lights, ’tis to ensnare:
I, toss’d in tedious Storms of troubled Thought,
Was careless of the Waves the Ocean brought.
My Anchor Hope was lost, and too too near
On either hand were Rocks of sad Despair.
Mistaken Seamen prais’d my fearless Mind,
Which, sunk in Seas of Grief, could dare the Wind.
In Life, tempestuous Life is dread and harm,
Approaching Death had no unpleasing Form;
Approaching Death appeases ev’ry Storm.

Anne Wharton
Thoughts occasion’d by her retirement into the Country67

All fly the unhappy & I all would fly
Knew I but where to goe, or how to dye
A Tomb of Sorrows is a dreadfull sight
Noe wonder—that a moveing grave should fright
Abandon’d, helples, & alone, I came
From nothing to this life, from ease to pain
My infant sighs did the small fabrick shake
As winds pent in, when from the earth they brake
Which every one for desmall Omens take
Twas then, alas, by certaine instinct taught
My Parents fled the world to which Ime brought
As if inspir’d by some Prophetick thought
They fear’d to see what I was born to prove
They fled from youth from pleasure & from love
But ’twas to meete againe, in groves above
An assignation justly tim’d and kept
The last unaunted went and timely leapt
That Gulf of Death her dearer half had past
Desire of Liberty her hopes encreas’d
Love lent her wings and added to her hast
But all too slow too late shee was releas’d
Too late for me for had shee sooner fled
She with her own had broke my twisted thred
That thred which since the Sisters wove is strong
As if they meant to prove theyr art was young
As in the worlds bright dawn, when sprightly life
Was proof against diseases, age and greif
Then men could live in spight of every dart
That death could fling, nor fear’d a broken heart
But I who have observ’d their Art decay
And that each chance could cleare to death the way
From greife expected long their mournfull ease
And learn’t to Smile at every pain’s increase
But now alas those fatall hopes decay
In spight of Sorrow I must longer stay
Hard is my Pilgrimage & long the way
In spight of me I finde I long must greive
Ah for what crimes am I condemn’d to live

67 Holkham Hall manuscript (MS 691), f. [2r-3r].
Els I might wander through unbounded Ayre
And learn to comprehend the secrets there
What rules are kept by every spark of light
Which forces day instead of shady night
What makes each day revive & still seem new
What makes the working Sun one track pursue
What makes A gay variety appeare
Through all the Seasons of the fertile year,
Some things so prone to chang & some there be
So wholy given up to constancy
In every thing the Eternall wisdom’s shewn
Nor does it less excell because unknown
Unknown to man to whom the work was given
Tho the prime work & cheifest care of heaven
How should A finite Creature know the store
Of Infinite, who is himself soe poore,
Noe wonder that we are fill’d with deep amaze
When on the glorious work we silent gaze
But our ambition we should higher raise
Not only to Admire but praise
Praise is that humble tribute he’ll receive
All that he asks and all that we cann give
He gave for us the World his life & power
And yet of us ne’er was exacted more
Ah knightly god that ever we should prove
That boundless Ocean of misterious love
I would goe on but in a strain soe high
A Soul buryed in Earth can never fly
I feel defects in every faculty
My thoughts are wrapt & my enliven’d mind
Disdaines that clay which keeps her flight behind
But if my Soul does the same Spirits hold
When freed by Heaven from this baser Mould
Then in immortall Song (noe Earthly verse)
She shall her makers wounderous praise rehearse
To all the Regions round she shall repair
And to give Sounds shall force the yeilding ayr
And then inspir’d by Heaven the Eternalls praise
Shall round the World , be sung in Heavenly layes
If ’tis his will but who that will can see
That will soe darkned o’er with mistery
We know not what his will exacteth here
Less can we know what ’twill command us there
Here I’me lost againe never the dead
Return’d to tell what was A soul when fled
Of what we there will doe we here may boast
But there for ought we know all thought is lost
To live or dye then I will now Submitt
Neither delay my death nor hasten it
All will be guided right when by his will
That Soul he gave he sure protecteth still

Notes:

7 *infant* Corrected from “nifiant.”
8 *pent* “Shut up” (Johnson).
9 *desmall* Dismal.
25 *theyr* Their.
39 *Ayre* Air.
53 *store* “Abundance” (*OED*).
62 *ne’er* A contraction of “never,” corrected from “ne’re.”
63 *prove* Experience.
64 *misterious* Mysterious.
65 *strain* Often a reference to poetry in general, but, in this context, related to the style/quality of the speaker’s poetry; *high* Divine.
67 *faculty* “The power of doing anything” (Johnson).
68 *wrapt* Alternative spelling of “rapt,” meaning “Transported into heaven” (*OED*).
69 *clay* “The human body as distinguished from the soul” (*OED*).
74 *repair* “To go to” (Johnson).
78 *but who that will can see* But who can see that will.
79 *Darkned* A spelling of “darkened” used in the seventeenth century; *o’er* Emended from “’ore,” likely a phonetic spelling of “o’er.”
85 *ought* Early modern spelling of “aught,” “Used to emphasize that a person is merely speculating” (*OED*).
Anne Bannerman
Sonnet VI. To the Ocean

Hush’d are thy stormy waves, tempestuous main!  
    Light o’er thy surface sports the genial air!  
Ah! who would think, that danger lurks within,  
    That ev’n thy murmu’ring seems to say—beware.

To my corroded mind, destructive deep!  
    Thy smiling aspect only brings despair,  
Reminds me, when the angry whirlwinds sweep  
    Along thy bosom, now so calm, so fair.

Reminds me, when, unpitying and untrue,  
    On the sunk rock thou driv’st the fated bark,  
Whelm’st in thy wat’ry breast the luckless crew,  
    And smil’st delighted in a scene so dark.
Such are thy dreadful trophies, ruthless main!  
What are thy triumphs—but another’s pain!

Notes:

7 whirlwinds Emended from “whirlwind’s,” a printer’s error.

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68 Poems (Edinburgh: Mundell & Son, 1800), 82.
Anne Bannerman
Sonnet V. To the Owl

I love thee, cheerless, melancholy bird!
    Soothing to me is thy funereal cry;
    Here build thy lonely nest, and ever nigh
My dwelling, be thy sullen wailings heard.

Amid the howlings of the northern blast,  
    Thou lov’st to mingle thy discordant scream,  
    Which to the visionary mind may seem  
To call the sufferer to eternal rest.

And sometimes, with the Spirit of the deep,  
    Thou swell’st the roarings of the stormy waves;  
    While, rising shroudless from their wat’ry graves,  
Aerial forms along the billows sweep.  
    Hark! loud, and louder still, the tempest raves;—  
And still I hear thee from the dizzy steep.

69 Poems (Edinburgh: Mundell & Son, 1800), 81.
Anne Bannerman
Sonnet IX. To the Cypress

Thro’ the long grass, that shrouds the lonely grave,
    When bleak at eve the gusts of winter blow,
I love to mark thy gloomy branches wave,
    And bend, lamenting, o’er the dust below.

Hush’d every accent, save the tempest’s moan,
    Which waves the tall weeds on the mould’ring sod:
Thou, faithful partner of the tomb! alone
    Dar’st own thy master, in his last abode.

Blest be thy shade, in endless verdure blest,
    And hallow’d every foot, that lingers near!
Ah! when the turf shall on my bosom rest,
    Still may’st thou murmur, ‘mid the silence drear,
To soothe, when ev’n affection shall decay,
    And leave the slumberer, to his kindred clay!

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70 Poems (Edinburgh: Mundell & Son, 1800), 85.
Anne Bannerman
Sonnet VIII

Is there a spot, in Nature’s wide domain,
   Where peace delights her fair abode to rear?
Where the sad heart shall never sigh again,
   Nor the dim’d eye be sullied with a tear?

Yes! to the sick’ning soul, by woes oppress’d,  
   And doom’d the pride of ignorance to bear,
Ev’n in this world there is one place of rest, 
   One sure asylum from corroding care.

Keen blows the win’try wind, and beats the rain,  
   And o’er its grassy roof the thunders rave;—
But warring elements essay in vain,  
   To wake the slumb’ring tenant of the grave.
Vouchsafe, oh Heaven! if still there’s peace for me,  
   That I that envied tenant soon may be!

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71 Poems (Edinburgh: Mundell & Son, 1800), 84.
Mrs. B. [Barbara] Finch  
Sonnet XX²²

The breeze is hush’d, nor thro’ the willow plays,—
   Its lank green branches float upon the stream,
In whose clear mirror Hesper’s silv’ry rays
   Reflected glitter—hide, fair star! thy beam;
On this sad breast, no cheering ray must shine;
And, rise ye winds! for ill this tranquil scene
   Accords with anguish so severe as mine:
Ah! more congenial, were the blast so keen
   That rudely rages round some sea-beat shore;
The dashing billow, and the roaring wave;—
And better far than all, a quiet grave,
   Where the afflicted heart shall throb no more:
But each dark cloud of human sorrow past,
The suff’ring spirit rest in peace at last.

⁷² Sonnets, and Other Poems: To Which are Added Tales in Prose (London: Blacks and Parry, 1805), 22.
Hush’d is the glade; the moon, serenely bright,
   Pours her mild rays aslant yon hoary hill;
No sound pervades the tranquil ear of Night,
   Save the deep murmurs of the falling rill.
Where yon huge cliff o’erhangs the silent deep,
   And o’er the wild wave bends his awful brow,
There shall my heart its mournful vigils keep,
   And count the hours which steep’d in sorrow flow.
How oft have Hope and Fancy smiling strove,
   O’er my sad soul to pour the balm of peace;
But Reason tore the wreath which Fancy wove,
   And frowning bade the lovely syren cease;
Bade me seek comfort for my aching breast
In the cold grave, where e’en the wretched rest.

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73 *Gresford Vale, and Other Poems* (London: Hookham and Carpenter, 1798), 35.
Elizabeth Villa-Real Gooch
Sonnet. To Imagination

Oh! come, Imagination! lend thy aid
To clear my path of Sorrow’s pointed thorn;
Where Hope’s fair blossoms soon began to fade,
And darksome clouds obscur’d the face of morn.

Say, canst thou teach me to forget my grief,
And lull to rest the cries of fell Despair?
Say, canst thou tell me where to find relief,
And smooth with airy visions rugged Care?—

Ah! no—thy fleeting joys are quickly past,
And Grief returns with doubled force, to prove
That when the die of Misery is cast,
There is no cure its evils to remove.
Adieu, then, Flatt’rer—let me patient bear
The heart’s sad wound, the unavailing tear!

74 Poems on Various Subjects (London: J. Bell, 1793), 18.
Studley! while Memory holds her seat,
And the last pulse of life shall beat
   Within my widow’d breast,
Thy shades, e’er present to my view,
Shall ev’ry heart-felt pang renew,
   And rob my soul of rest!

The thoughts of thee those days retrace,
When youth with smiles bedeck’d my face—
   When, innocently gay,
I stray’d thy verdant lawns among,
And listen’d to the woodlark’s song,
   And ring-dove’s piercing lay.

’Twas there, alas! my infant mind,
To love and tenderness inclin’d,
   First taught me how to feel
That deep, that agonizing wound
For which no palliative is found,
   But Death alone can heal.

Long have I drank of Sorrow’s wave,
And early wish’d an early grave,
   These ills no more t’ endure:
One solitary hope remains
To mitigate my present pains,
   That Grief, though slow, is sure!

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75 Poems on Various Subjects (London: J. Bell, 1793), 5-6.
Nature’s most perfect work will fail
When Sickness and Disease assail.
Whether brought on by Sorrow’s stings,
Or borne on Constitution’s wings,
The fabric soon will be o’erthrown,
If by Oppression’s weight borne down.

With fearless, with undaunted eye,
I see approach MORTALITY!
Not half so hideous to my view
As Retrospect’s too sad review.
When I survey those pleasures past,
Of which I early saw the last,
And think upon my wretched fate,
My sad, forlorn, my cruel state—
When Truth still dictates to my mind,
That all I lov’d has prov’d unkind—
Disease alone can make me blest,
It brings me to a place of rest.

Come, then (sad remedy!), come, Grief,
Thou messenger of quick relief,
And take me from this world of woe,
Where ev’ry Friend has prov’d a Foe!

The shroud once wound about my head,
Will no one mourn for VILLA dead?
Will no one think (alas, too late!)
She had deserv’d a better fate?
Will no one drop the pitying tear,
And each unkind reproach forbear?
Alas! if such a one there be,
Why was he never known to me?

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76 Poems on Various Subjects (London: J. Bell, 1793), 7-8.
When ev’ry eye is lull’d to balmy sleep,
    And Nature brings to common ills relief,
I steal unnotic’d to the craggy steep,
    Think on my sorrows, and indulge my grief.

From the high cliff I mark each gushing wave
    That madly breaks among the rocks below;
And oft am tempted by Despair to brave,
    With hasty plunge, the “element of woe.”

Officious Hope arrests my tortur’d mind,
    Too long the victim of Suspense and Pain;
Full oft to hear its dictates I’ve inclind’d,
    But years have prov’d the flatt’ring promise vain.

——I gaze with horror on the boundless main;—
My coward heart shrinks back—and trusts to Hope again.

Notes: