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Nancy Easterlin
University of New Orleans, neasterl@uno.edu

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Nancy Easterlin
University of New Orleans

Aesthetics and Ideology in Felicia Hemans's *The Forest Sanctuary*: A Biocultural Perspective

Over the past several decades, the canon of British literature has altered considerably, as women and other previously unstudied writers have become a central focus of investigation. But the terms on which these figures have been included in the canon are often somewhat murky. Both cultural studies and feminism place a premium on the contemporaneous popularity of a writer as a rationale for canonical status, viewing aesthetic criteria as self-interested terms of exclusion (Latané 208). For this reason, any perceived aesthetic shortcomings of recovered literature are generally delegitimized as a capitulation to values biased toward white males, and although only a few scholars champion the artistry of poems like Felicia Hemans's *The Forest Sanctuary* (Anderson; Sweet), criticism on the whole sidesteps the conflict between popularity and aesthetics.

The purpose of the present essay is to investigate the aesthetic value of *The Forest Sanctuary* from a biocultural perspective, suggesting that the salient properties of wayfinding cognition can shed some light on the matter. This essay builds on my previous biocultural discussions of literary aesthetics by bringing a dynamic model of the wayfinding, human mind to questions of value ("Cognitive Predispositions," "How to Write," *Biocultural*, chapter 2). I posit that evolved interest in kinds of novelty salient to human survival have identifiable correlates in literary artifacts, a view that converges with empirical studies by Don Kuiken and David S. Miall. Differentiating between everyday discourse, which is stereotypical and instantiates "common interpretive schemata," and literature, Miall asserts that "Literature . . . facilitates changes in perception or in the self in its relationship with others, thus enhancing the survival and reproductive ability of the group" (Miall, "Evolutionary Framework," 199). Here, I link Miall's assertion of an evolved predisposition for the defamiliarizing capacity for novelty to a model of the mind based specifically on the features of human evolution.

Felicia Hemans's poetry is not "literature" in Miall's special sense of the term, because it does not produce uncertainty through stylistic variation and foregrounding that results in a "modification or transformation of a conventional feeling or concept"

("What" 123). In what follows, I will provide an overview of central features of human wayfinding cognition that function significantly in literary processing, especially suggesting that the predisposition to attend to novelty underwrites the predilection for defamiliarization (or originality) in literature. In my discussion of Hemans, I will demonstrate that the poet, in fact, intentionally avoids novel uses of language that might produce uncertainty and changes in the self. Hemans's choice of stereotypical language is in accord with her culture's prescribed role for the woman poet and with the attendant ideological function of her poetry, which reinforces rather than questions received beliefs and perceptions. Thus, the biocultural perspective presented here highlights how nineteenth-century gender bias, by extending women's domestic role into their artistic production, militated against the production of high-quality poetry by women.

Wayfinding Cognition and the Literary Environment

The evolution of every organism is relative to the specific environmental pressures experienced by that organism and by its capacity to adapt to the environment based on those pressures. To all evidence, humans followed a remarkably distinctive route once they branched off from the great apes, coming to inhabit, in the metaphor of John Tooby and Irven DeVore, the cognitive niche. Moderately sized and not particularly swift, humans were vulnerable on the open savannah, and interpersonal and group attachments that promoted bonds between kin evolved as a protective mechanism against larger predators and other human groups. Higher intelligence evolved in tandem with kinship groups, because monitoring and maintaining social groups and relationships is cognitively demanding. However, several other features of human evolution also necessitated increased intelligence. Whatever its evolutionary cause—the reduction of heat stress, the liberation of the hands for other uses, and/or the facilitation of face-to-face interactions, which enhance sociality—bipedalism calls for a bigger brain that can coordinate many muscle groups (*Mithan After; Singing*). Certainly, all the pressures pushing humans toward their "niche" as a knowledge-seeking, wayfinding species rewarded and kept alive a thinking, social animal.

For the overwhelming majority of species, the concept of the evolutionary niche typically corresponds to a distinctive physical domain, its resources, climate, and other attributes. By contrast, early humans gained an adaptive advantage through the capacity to travel across and survive within different territories. Superior cognitive ability rather than physical domain, in other words, became the "niche," the hallmark of survival. Instrumental intelligence entails the capacity to abstract from a situation

and form cause-effect models that facilitate environmental manipulations (Tooby and DeVore). Adapting as a home-based but far-ranging species, humans required the capacity for instrumental, abstract situation modeling that extends cognitive and behavioral flexibility. Whereas instinctive patterns and responses, like migration in birds and butterflies and fight or flight, have a special efficiency or direct pay-off and largely serve the adaptive demands of most species, they do not suit the wayfinder, who must gather and remember information that often does not have a direct and immediate application (Kaplan). Perceptual attunement to register changes in flora, fauna, weather, and the like crucially cued early humans to available new foods as well as dangerous predators and unfriendly human groups within the vicinity. The early evolution in all terrestrial animals of sense organs clustered around the head aided in the separation of exploratory from performatory activity, a separation that humans, with their large brains and excellent eyesight, exploited to the full for knowledge-seeking purposes (Gibson, Reed). Changes in cloud patterns, edible plants and fruits, natural shelters, and unfamiliar animal sounds, for instance, serve as affordances for wayfinding humans, providing information about aspects of the surroundings and thus serving as opportunities for a range of actions.

This wayfinding orientation and the central characteristics that support it in human evolution explain both the development of literature and its most central features. As a knowledge-seeking species making meanings from its perceptions, homo sapiens have successfully altered physical environments over the past 10,000 years—altered them to such an extent that they sometimes believe these and the manifold attributes of culture no longer reflect our evolved psychology save in the most trivial way. In contradistinction to this, I argue that the bodily basis of human cognition shapes our entry into and governs possibilities within literary environments, enormously various as these may be. Aesthetic evaluation, in turn, concerns the treatment of these features within generic and other cultural contexts. Four features of our evolved cognition underlie core dimensions of the literary environment: the rudimentary sense of self, the predisposition toward narrative organization, the attunement to affordances, and the propensity for strong social attachments.

Organism and environment are interdependent concepts (and entities), but every organism must have a sense of itself as separate from that environment to navigate through it. The sense of self is, in Antonio Damasio's words, a fundamental point of reference (134-43), and according to developmental psychologist Daniel N. Stern, the human infant has an emergent sense of self from birth. Over time, humans develop an elaborate autobiographical self, an internal narrative that perhaps explains one's traits, behavior, and preferences in terms of the past and that projects

future goals on the basis of this internal story. Every work of literature enlists one or more focalizing perspectives, establishing a bodily based point of orientation for the reader through narrative point of view, character, or the position of a speaker, sometimes merely implied, as in a lyric poem, for instance. Readers can shift focalizing perspectives or proxy selves within the literary environment—indeed, they can do so with great facility—but they are never without a point of reference.

Narrative thought or narrativity, the propensity to chain events in linear and usually causal sequence, appears to be a central and robust feature of human cognition (Bruner, Lloyd, Schank). E.O. Wilson identifies the proclivity to infer causality, which undergirds narrative, as an epigenetic rule, while the developmental ecological psychologists Eleanor Gibson and Anne Pick identify it as a concept learned over time for the infant as he or she learns about control. But whether causality is learned or built in to the human organism, it must be grasped early, and its elaboration into narratives including self, others, and nonhuman environment provide a tool for moving from thought into action. Phylogenetically, narrative cognition long predates language, a very recent development in evolutionary history. In literature, the ubiquity of story structures is the most obvious testimony to our propensity for narrative. But as Patrick Hogan points out, even nonnarrative genres frequently imply a narrative context. Readers will impute narrative elements to nonnarrative works just as they enjoy explicit narrative for a range of context-dependent reasons. In sum, the propensity for cause-effect situation modeling characteristic of instrumental intelligence undergirds reader processing (and writer construction) of literary works.

Attention to affordances, as I have suggested above, forms a crucial aspect of all species' survival, and for humans, environmental affordances over the course of evolution have been tremendously varied because the species has so successfully expanded the physical domain of its existence. In the interests of survival, then, it is not only logical but obligatory that humans, as knowledge-seeking wayfinders, embrace novelty, though they experience a tension between "seeking knowledge and avoiding what is new," also in the interests of survival (Kaplan 585). In other words, the relative frequency (in comparison to other species) of change and variety in terrain, weather, proximate animal populations, plants, and other human groups entails the inherent challenge of dealing, for good or ill, with the new, and new things must then necessarily attract attention and arouse emotion to be dealt with in a life-sustaining manner.

The notion of affordance, or opportunity for action, is necessarily broad, framed within ecological psychology's reconceptualization of organisms as

continuously engaged in their environments, a reconceptualization precipitated by the passive concept of organisms undergirding stimulus-response models. Thus, for example, a hidden cave, a person of sexual interest, and a new type of fruit-bearing tree afford opportunities for diverse forms of action (Appleton, Orians and Heerwagen). However, the actions afforded by aspects of the surround depend crucially on all other elements of the immediate environment. A sexually attractive member of the same species does not present an opportunity for action during a violent thunderstorm or in the presence of a charging bull or jealous mate. In such instances, the immediate threat to survival takes precedence, that is, is itself perceived as the opportunity for action, the affordance, over the attractive potential mate. The concept of affordance, in other words, is relative to the functional advisability of engaging with the potential benefits or dangers of the entity in the ever-changing environment.

The knowledge-seeking, wayfinding mind presents and demands an array of affordances in literature and frequently requires novelty in the presentation of affordances. In description, imagery, or metaphor, readers either desire novelty in the literary feature itself or seek it from the connection the feature enlists cognitively, through its relation to other aspects of the text and through its relationship to literary and other cultural contexts. From the point of view of traditional criticism, description and metaphor are quite different techniques; from a cognitive point of view, both can successfully function as opportunities for mental action because they are based on a physiological perception of the body in a physical location (Johnson; Lakoff and Johnson).

The propensity for strong social attachments is a distinctive feature of human beings, one critical to the survival of the species. Ironically, although writing and reading literature are both solitary enterprises, it is difficult to imagine either having much success in a species that is not comprehensively social. Robin Dunbar suggests, in fact, that language evolved primarily to promote the efficient maintenance of social relations, rather than to serve communicative needs. But clearly, literary works both communicate between individuals and serve to promote social relationships in a variety of ways. Literature is embedded in our profoundly social nature, and often the means by which human interaction, society, and ideology are represented or stand as a background to a particular literary text loses or gains its value in light of its contemporaneous sociocultural context.

Processing literature is isomorphic rather than merely analogous to wayfinding cognition within a material environment. The reader seeks to orient in the literary environment by aligning with a proxy self, or viewpoint—a point of reference—

and he or she assesses affordances in the process of constructing a narrative, a cognitive procedure which is indispensable to comprehension of the literary work, just as it is indispensable to interpreting and negotiating a physical environment. No matter how achronological or fragmentary a work is, readers typically work to construct coherence by attributing sequential and causal relation to actors, actions, and objects. Within this model of literary reading, the definition of “affordance” includes not only tropes and images but cultural references and belief systems, all of which offer opportunities for cognitive action. But importantly, humans exhibit a cognitive bias toward novelty that derives from the need for attunement to a changing environment (Miall; Massey 94-95), and this bias toward the unusual plays a central role in aesthetic evaluation. A literary work that relies on habituated responses will not be prized aesthetically, over the long term. This accords with Miall’s claim that the unusual or novel is a key feature of literature, which “facilitates changes in perception or in the self in its relationship with others, thus enhancing the survival and reproductive ability of the group” (Miall, “Evolutionary Framework,” 199).

Wayfinding Aesthetics and *The Forest Sanctuary*

The Forest Sanctuary, published in 1825, falls within the tradition of the romance epic, the blend between the epic and the romance genres that emerged as these developed up through the romantic period. Furthermore, as a poem whose drama is primarily centered in the speaker, it is a *romantic epic*, built on the merger of lyric and narrative elements that is a hallmark of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, undoubtedly an influence on Hemans, and Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, which was not published until after her death and his (1850). Like Byron’s poem, it is written in Spenserian stanza. The primary drama of the poem is centered in the consciousness of the speaker rather than in externalized actions, as in the classical genres, and it continues an already developed tradition of epics of the 1790s that reject a masculinist militarism as integral to a definition of national identity, such as Landor’s *Gebir* and Barlow’s *Columbiad* (Kelly 40–43; Curran 168–70), but it shares with the romance a limited scope of events, an overtly Christian ideology, and an idealized, Christianized concept of self-realization.

The poem takes place during the sixteenth century and describes the travails of a former Spanish conquistador who has fled the Inquisition and taken refuge with his young son in the North American wilderness. Speaking to his child, he recounts in Part First the horror of seeing his friend Alvar and his sister burned at the stake and the crisis of faith and conversion this incident precipitated. In Part Second, he recounts his flight from Spain with his child and still-Catholic wife Leonor, who

dies aboard the ship. After a time of wandering in South America, he and his son have fled to North America to escape colonial warfare there.

As a sustained work (1537 lines divided into 2 major parts) operating within epic and romance conventions and produced by and for wayfinding minds, *The Forest Sanctuary* cannot help but engage with the prototypical characteristics of evolved psychology described above. As this summary makes clear, because the dramatic focus of the poem concerns the speaker's ability to come to terms with his several griefs—the loss of his friends, his wife, and his homeland—his psychological struggle forms its overarching narrative. Within this larger, somewhat troubled, narrative structure, retrospective stories of such episodes as the *auto de fé*, the conversion, and Leonor's death serve as concrete affordances for the speaker (and readers); his articulation of these events not only explains his crisis but, potentially, provides an opportunity for psychological change, expanding the narrative framework as he attempts to come to terms with these events in light of his new faith and his new home. Since Hemans focalizes narrative perspective through the speaker and since he is as well the primary character, subordinate narrative elements and a sense of locale impinge on readers' perception of the narrator, whom he or she tracks or identifies with as a projected self in the literary environment. In other words, the capacity to sustain narrative action (either internal or external) in a concretely realized place meets basic requirements of the reading mind.

Richard Cronin remarks that "Hemans' poems range further from home in time and in space than those of her male predecessors with the possible exception of Southey" (214), and the developing body of criticism about this popular nineteenth-century poet frequently notes the historical, mythical, and global extensiveness of her subjects. In light of a built-in preference for novelty, then, Hemans's choice of dramatic subject and setting are promising, because humans are stimulated by new environments and the meaning-making opportunities they afford in literature, just as in life. At the same time, Hemans's choices present writerly challenges that cannot be evaded: both the setting and the genre necessitate the concrete realization of place. The romantic epic, a long form containing embedded actions and exotic locations, particularly primes readers to attend to aspects of the represented environment that promote action. This is the case whether the action is physical or psychological, as is often the case in the romantic epic.

In the opening stanzas of *The Forest Sanctuary*, Hemans herself calls attention to physical location and invites assessment of affordances within it, as the speaker begins his narrative with a reminiscence of the "household voices" that remind him of his home country and his loved ones and as he mourns his losses from

the North American wilderness. Simultaneously, however, the poet's use of stock language inhibits readers' construction of and entry into the imagined environment. In effect, Hemans forestalls at the outset changes in perception or the self that are, according to Miall, precipitated by the uncertainty and meaning-making processes that novelty triggers:

The voices of my home!—I hear them still!
 They have been with me through the dreamy night—
 The blessed household voices, wont to fill
 My heart's clear depths with unalloy'd delight!
 I hear them still, unchang'd:—though some from earth
 Are music parted, and the tones of mirth—
 Wild, silvery tones, that rang through days more bright!
 Have died in others,—yet to me still they come,
 Singing of boyhood back—the voices of my home!

They call me through this hush of woods, reposing
 In the grey stillness of the summer morn,
 They wander by when heavy flowers are closing,
 And thoughts grow deep, and winds and stars are born;
 Ev'n as a fount's remember'd gushings burst
 On the parch'd traveller in his hour of thirst,
 E'en thus they haunt me with sweet sounds, till worn
 By quenchless longings, to my soul I say—
 Oh! For the dove's swift wings, that I might flee away,—

And find mine ark—yet whither?—I must bear
 A yearning heart within me to the grave.
 I am of those o'er whom a breath of air—
 Just darkening in its course the lake's bright wave,
 And sighing through the feathery canes—hath power
 To call up shadows, in the silent hour,
 From the dim past, as from a wizard's cave!—
 So must it be!—These skies above me spread,
 Are they my own soft skies? Ye rest not here, my dead!

Ye far amidst the southern flowers lie sleeping,
 Your graves all smiling in the sunshine clear,
 Save one!—a blue, lone, distant main is sweeping
 High o'er *one* gentle head—ye rest not here!—
 'Tis not the olive, with a whisper swaying,
 Not thy low rippings, glassy water, playing
 Through my own chestnut groves, which fill mine ear;
 But the faint echoes in my breast that dwell,

And for their birth-place moan, as moans the ocean-shell.

(1.1–36)

Given the dramatic situation of the poem, two types of affordances are especially salient: those that locate the speaker in his present circumstances and those that

characterize his grief and longing. As here depicted, the speaker's immediate surroundings and his yearning for home serve as weak opportunities for action for readers. In spite of Hemans's assiduous research on her far-ranging subject matter, in her depiction of the wilderness, she employs a stock set of phrases that provide only the most generalized sense of place: "dreamy night," "silvery tones," "hush of woods," "heavy flowers," "lake's bright wave," "silent hour," "dim past," "soft skies," "distant main," and so on.

Traditional criticism disparages such clichéd imagery, but is there a biocultural explanation for the offensiveness of received phrases? The importance of specific description, and hence the preference for novel imagery in literature—for defamiliarizing or dishabituating imagery—derives from the species need for functional accuracy in real environments and, if anything, the preference for it in literature increases with the technical and physical changes resulting from industrialization and global expansion in the nineteenth century. The commonplace phrases Hemans employs, and her refusal to weave her images into a coherent description of the landscape, inhibits visualization and therefore the imaginative perception of the speaker as actually located in the wilderness. The poet's use of stock imagery thus has repercussions for readers' perception of the speaker as well as their ability to enter into the literary environment. As Cronin remarks, "Hemans' poems present to the reader a glassy surface that seems to offer no crevice to which the critical intelligence can cling" (212). The meditative and elegiac opening of *The Forest Sanctuary* calls special attention to this vague imagery, even while the deadness of the language deprives it of a central epistemic function.

Generalized imagery of this kind, which effectively deprives readers of the environment it simultaneously invites them to enter, is characteristic of Hemans' writing, and it is likewise a distinctive characteristic of all sentimental verse. Furthermore, the wayfinding model of literary cognition lends support to traditional analyses of sentimentality. In his analysis of Hemans' lyric "Bring Flowers," Derek Furr points out that sentimental imagery is "emblematic and evocative of the general ideas and sentiments that Hemans and her readers expect from a given occasion" (33). Rather than enlisting the construction of meaning within the poem that specific, novel imagery or metaphor solicits, Furr explains, "'Bring Flowers' involves the personal history of its reader, who feels the lines because she fills them with private meaning and substance Hemans wants her poem to provide a space for emotional recall and an occasion for emotional release" (33). If the defamiliarizing effect of novelty functions to produce changes in perception or the self as a consequence of the active construction of new meaning, then, sentimental

language works contrarily to affirm received meanings, stereotypical perception, and a conventionalized sense of self. Sentimentality functions similarly, though more complexly, in the unrealized depiction of the American wilderness in *The Forest Sanctuary*. The vague, otherworldly aura of the place combined with the general reference to “household voices” requires the reader at the outset to import nostalgic impressions into the work rather than construct meaning on the basis of a particularized situation and a concretely realized environment. Even though I believe Hemans intends this effect for ideological reasons I’ll discuss shortly, the poem’s willingness to undermine what it self-consciously invites produces a strangely suspended sense of the speaker’s situation that conflicts with the experience of emotional crisis he reports. The poem makes, fundamentally, an ambivalent and dishonest appeal for readers’ participation.

Since the poem is a first-person account, the language of these stanzas shapes on readers’ perceptions of the speaker, who longs for his dead wife and friends, purportedly in conflict over his ability to accept, emotionally and spiritually, his new circumstances. However, that longing is attenuated not only by the initial sentimental functionality of the imagery but by the correspondingly sentimental references to “blessed household voices” and “the voices of my home,” which are also “evocative of general ideas and sentiments” rather than specifically descriptive of the speaker’s situation, and therefore cannot operate as affordances within the unfolding psychological drama. Thus, readers understand from the contents of the stanzas that the speaker is grieving, but that grief seems inauthentic, just as the chosen setting seems gratuitous. The pleasant and sentimental imagery of “household voices” haunting the speaker in an idyllic place consorts oddly with the presumed reality of his pain, conveying an unbelievable sense of detachment from his own emotional condition. John M. Anderson interprets such passages as intentional efforts to dramatize detachment, but if they are, they need to be counterbalanced by a sense of threat from within or without that alerts readers to the dangers of such a psychological predicament by undercutting the speaker’s perceptions.

Assuredly, Hemans does not wish to project falsity in the speaker’s voice, but this is the inevitable consequence of minimizing essential cognitive aspects of the literary environment to successfully highlight the Christian allusions that provide what are for Hemans’s the key affordances within this introductory portion of the poem. The speaker asks “for the dove’s swift wings, that I might flee away/And find mine ark!—yet whither?—I must bear/A yearning heart within me to the grave.” For Hemans’s contemporaneous readers, the allusion within these lines serves as an affordance directing them to a protestant creed that lies outside the poem: one

must look to God and Christian faith for deliverance. This ideological affordance gains strength through the weak realization of the physical location and the speaker himself, for by asking the reader to draw on stock emotions and associations rather than imagine individualized suffering in distinct circumstances, Hemans avoids reader identification with genuine crisis and doubt and prevents immersion within the world of the poem and, with it, the possibility of “changes in perception or in the self in its relation with others.”

Notably, Hemans does convey a more particularized sense of the environment and a more correspondingly authentic sense of the speaker's self-crisis at the point where these elements are narratively aligned with the ideological purpose of the poem, the moment of the speaker's conversion that is the climax and conclusion of Part First. Because the ideological context governs both the imagery and its possible semantic implications, Hemans can develop it more specifically without the threat of unwanted new meanings casting doubt on the religious belief the poem is intended to support:

I turn'd—what glimmer'd faintly on my sight,
Faintly, yet brightening, as a wreath of snow
Seen through dissolving haze?—The moon, the night,
Had waned, and dawn pour'd in;—grey, shadowy, slow,
Yet day-spring still!—a solemn hue it caught,
Piercing the storied windows, darkly fraught
With stoles and draperies of imperial glow;
And soft, and sad, that colouring gleam was thrown,
Where, pale, a pictur'd form above the altar shone.

Thy form, Thou Son of God!—a wrathful deep,
With foam, and cloud, and tempest, round Thee spread,
And such a weight of night!—a night, when sleep
From the fierce rocking of the billows fled.
A bark show'd dim beyond Thee, with its mast
Bow'd, and its rent sail shivering to the blast;
But, like a spirit in thy gliding tread,
Thou, as o'er glass, didst walk that stormy sea
Through rushing winds, which left a silent path for Thee.

So still thy white robes fell!—no breath of air
Within their long and slumberous folds had sway!
So still the waves of parted, shadowy hair
From thy clear brow flow'd droopingly away!
Dark were the heavens above Thee, Saviour!—dark
The gulfs, Deliverer! round the straining bark!
But Thou!—o'er all thine aspect and array
Was pour'd one stream of pale, broad silvery light—
Thou wert the single star of that all-shrouding night!

Aid for one sinking!—Thy lone brightness gleam'd
 On his wild face, just lifted o'er the wave,
 With its worn, fearful, *human* look that seem'd
 To cry through surge and blast—"I perish—save!"
 Not to the winds—not vainly!—thou wert nigh,
 Thy hand was stretch'd to fainting agony,
 Even in the portals of th' unquiet grave!
 O Thou that art the life! And yet didst bear
 Too much of mortal woe to turn from mortal prayer!

(1.721–56)

In these stanzas that precipitate the speaker's conversion to protestantism, the imagery conveying his vision of Christ develops progressively and dramatically with the state of feeling he recounts. Hemans invites the reader into the scene by presenting description and imagery that requires active sense-making, or the assessment of concrete environmental affordances, as the process of visually tracing the alteration in the light from hazy coldness to warm illumination parallels the emergence of spiritual hope within the speaker. The glimmering light like "a wreath of snow/Seen through dissolving haze" particularizes the changing light and necessitates that the reader envision it in relation to the speaker, who is concretely located in the scene. As night accedes to day, the "grey, shadowy, slow" dawn illuminates the stained glass windows along the side of the church, drawing his attention to the central image of Christ above the altar. Although the speaker is describing the church windows, his description fuses with a sense of actual vision because Hemans merges the speaker's recollection of the Biblical scene and his emotional state. The storm depicted in the windows echoes the "pent storms of thought" (l. 682) tormenting the speaker before he turned into the church, and Christ walking on water "as o'er glass" recalls the "gorgeous pavement" (l. 689) of the church floor, upon which the speaker now stands (Sweet 175). The shifting images of light become associated with Christ's robes and with the "one stream of pale, broad, silvery light" which the speaker identifies with Christ as "the single star of that all-shrouding night." Thus, the perception of Christ as deliverer in the Biblical scene coalesces with the developing drama of Christ as the speaker's deliverer as his brightness in the stained glass depiction corresponds to the brightening of the church at daybreak. Hemans emphasizes the simultaneity of his conscious perception of Christ in the scene and his own dilemma through his subsequent identification with the drowning man in the scene, over whose "wild face" Christ's "lone brightness gleam'd." The suffering of Christ, "whose hand was stretched to fainting agony," underscores an identification of the speaker, the drowning man, and Christ himself, and emotionally prepares the way for the speaker's anguished appeal to him.

In contrast to the poem's opening, then, Hemans relies primarily on novel reconfigurations of conventional images to provide an integrated perception of the speaker and the scene. It is not an accident that the language most vivid in characterizing physical place occurs in a church at the time of the speaker's conversion, for such language can only intensify, rather than distract from, the spiritual content of the stanzas. Thus, since the imagery of the conversion passage reinforces the poem's religious message, its dynamism only enhances that message. Significantly, no such ideological orthodoxy governs the initial depiction of the American wilderness, where the reader's encounter with a uniquely specified place would enlist an involvement that both distracts from Hemans's conventional purpose and conflicts with her religious goals. As Charlotte Sussman points out, Hemans's imprecise language for American flora and fauna is of a piece with her intention to privilege a "transnational experience of God over national identity" (499). I would take Sussman's claim further, proposing that Hemans elevates the experience of God over earthly identity, pointing, as Tricia Lootens notes that she does in the contemporaneous "Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New England," toward heaven as the ultimate spiritual home of the transnational spiritual family. *The Forest Sanctuary* consistently and negatively aligns attachment to physical place with Catholicism and the Inquisition, with a retrograde religion and a politically oppressive system of government. The speaker's still-Catholic wife, Leonor, tied "to that sole spot of earth/Where she hath loved, and given her children birth/And heard their first sweet voices" (2.293–95), dies as they pass under the Southern Cross, surely employed symbolically to designate the passing from the old (Catholic) order into the new (protestant) one. Within the overarching metaphor of the poem, the movement from east to west signals the movement from earthly existence to spiritual home, and within such a conception there is no place for a wife tied to the land, nation, and religion of the past.

In sum, the construction of a particularized literary environment potentially threatens the ideological functioning of religious and sentimental poetry, because novel, concretely realized images and metaphors trigger adapted processes of knowledge seeking and meaning making that inherently conflict with received meaning. Conversely, the deployment of conventional imagery in the opening of *The Forest Sanctuary* prohibits the very involvement the poem solicits, controlling reader emotion and with it semantic construction. This biocultural analysis is in keeping with traditional criticism of the poet's approach to figures of speech. In an essay on Hemans's "The Traveller at the Source of the Nile," Christoph Bode criticizes the poet for her "almost instinctive timidity and fear of the dynamics of

metaphor, of the implications of the trope [of river and source], which makes the poem shrink back from its subject—the quest for the sources of the Nile—because it is scared of what is metaphorically implied It avoids this metaphorical space simply because *it is so rich and so hard to control*” (77). (The poem ends with the explorer’s recognition of the futility of such enterprises and his sentimental longing for home.) Metaphors, like images, concretize the literary environment, providing the substance of an imaginative domain that readers navigate within. However, the production of novel metaphors and images necessarily entails uses of language that are “hard to control.” The reason literary readers value novel renderings is that they trigger a negotiation of meanings parallel to the cognitive process of navigating a new environment whose objects, persons, and animals command attention. Conventional imagery, in effect, distances the reader from the poem by cuing him or her not to be alert, in the same way that persons become habituated to traversing a familiar route and do not attend to their surroundings. By pushing readers away from the fictional situation in which she simultaneously invites engagement, Hemans avoids actual participation in the speaker’s detachment and doubt, preventing his personal dilemma from becoming too real to readers and possibly threatening their beliefs. That Hemans’s speaker is left with residual doubt at the conclusion of the poem attests, like the conversion scene in Part First, to a contradictory desire on the poet’s part for psychological realism, but it is a realism compromised by trade-offs in reader investment, evident in the opening and in many other parts of the poem, that Hemans was obligated to make in the service of ideology.

The great popularity of Felicia Hemans’s verse in the nineteenth century was the result of her careful negotiation of the priorities of audiences and editors (Feldman). Advised by the dominant critic Francis Jeffrey that the task of the epic lay beyond the pale of women’s abilities, Hemans took his recommendation and committed herself to shorter forms after publication of *The Forest Sanctuary*. Even her friend Henry Chorley, claiming that the characteristically feminine quality of her verse rested in its display of unselfish love and unquestioning religious devotion, revealed in the midst of his praise that to be quintessentially feminine is to necessarily weigh lighter in the scales of poetic worth than her male counterparts. Truly, “The ‘essentially womanly’ [in Chorley’s definition] is a perfection of absences, a purity bleached of intellectual vigor and psychological interest” (Wolfson 44). Hemans assumed the poetess role—that of the self-consciously feminine writer—partly in response to post-revolutionary prejudices that linked literary women to sensualism and radical politics (Morlier). Thus, the “glassy surface” of her verse is a product of combining under-realized imagery with harmonious tone, resulting in a sentimental, domestic,

nationalistic, and religious poetry that, in spite of some surprising subjects, does little to unsettle received perceptions and ideas. From a historical perspective, it seems clear that the dictates of culture in the early nineteenth century put tremendous pressure on women poets to write within conventional constraints. The biocultural perspective offered here further posits that the alignment of the “womanly” with the conventional operated to consign female poets to the lesser ranks of writers. Dissuaded from producing novel and engaging literary environments, writers like Hemans produced verse that resists the meaning-making processes and the adjustment in perception or changes in the self that are the product of defamiliarization and, correspondingly, the core features valued in literary art.

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