

SPECULATIONS FINANCIAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL

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“Seated on her Bags of Dollars”: Representations of America in the English Jacobin Novel

IN THE 1790S, THE ENGLISH Jacobin novel engaged in a sustained narrative critique of contractarianism. While it supported the foundational premises of contractarianism—for example, the concept of inalienable rights for the individual—it also exposed the restrictive requirements and specifications that proponents of the social contract were imposing on political agency. In the fiction of Robert Bage, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Charlotte Smith, among others, it becomes evident that liberty is a function of property.¹ To establish political authority, one has to be able to claim the right of property, which begins with self-governance and culminates in proprietorship within society.² Financial dependence means disqualification, and it precludes enfranchisement or claims to political authority in any form, thereby excluding large segments of the populations such as women. Consequently, the English Jacobin

¹ For an extended discussion of liberty as a function of property in early contractarian thought, see C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (London: Oxford UP, 1962).

² In *Two Treatises on Government*, Locke establishes ownership of the self as the most fundamental form of proprietorship and an essential precursor to political authority. “Though the Earth, and all inferior Creatures be common to all Man, yet every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*. This no Body has any Right to but himself.” See Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1960) 287. Nearly a century later in his influential *Rights of Man*, Paine describes citizenship as a “proprietorship in society.” See Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, 2nd ed. (London: J.S. Jordan, 1791) 53.

novel wrestled with this fundamental paradox of property. The right of property was a means of breaking open the franchise, but it also continued to be a divisive force in society. It was necessary to political agency, but its absence was a means of denying subjectivity.

One consistent narrative location for investigations into the role of property is the representation of America. When this newly independent nation appears in the English Jacobin novel, it is almost always a means to exploring the relationship between ownership and subjectivity. America was an especially vital mechanism for this particular inquiry, I suggest, for two main reasons. First, America *was* property: it was abundant in land, a site of new and expansive commerce, and a territory populated by individuals who could lay claim to self-ownership either because of the status of “noble savage” or because of their access to land and commercial enterprise. Second, America bore a significant relationship to France. Not only did they share a common enemy—Great Britain—they were also both engaged in establishing governments based on similar revolutionary sentiments. France was often seen as the exporter of democratic ideals—indeed, one of Robert Bage’s characters hears the “tastes of France” in an American speech.³ It is more likely, however, that France was influenced by the social thought of early America, not to mention that of the British Dissenting movement as well.⁴ In either case, a rigorous intellectual exchange between America and France certainly seems to have informed the political philosophy of both nations in the 1790s, and their revolutionary governments shared certain republican goals. For the English Jacobin novel, then, America presented itself as a viable substitute for France when the egregious violence of the French Revolution made it difficult to tout the European nation as a model of liberty. As the decade wore on and revolutionary France turned into Napoleon’s empire, America became an increasingly important alternative. Mary Wollstonecraft, when pointing out the errors made by France’s revolutionary government in her *Historical and Moral View of the Ori-*

³ Robert Bage, *Hermesprong; or Man As He Is Not* (London, 1796; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 73.

⁴ Seamus Deane, *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England, 1789–1832* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988) 162–63. Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World* (New York: Norton, 2000) 6–12.

gin and Progress of the French Revolution (1794), frequently uses America as an example of "how to do it right," of how forces of resistance may transform themselves into a stable, tolerant authority, rather than a despotic state.⁵

The representations of America that I discuss in this essay are taken from three English Jacobin novels: Robert Bage's *Hermsprong* (1796), Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798) and Charlotte Smith's *The Young Philosopher* (1798). Together they exemplify the range of possibilities that America presented to British reformers in the 1790s. In all three instances, I will argue, America in some way signifies the evolving relationship between property and subjectivity and the dilemma it caused for reformers and contractarianism at the end of the eighteenth century. Bage's *Hermsprong* celebrates America in the tradition of political travelogues, such as Brissot's *Nouveau Voyage Dans Les Etats-Unis* (1791), that set America up as a paradigm of liberty.⁶ Likewise, it embraces property through a protagonist who has it all: land, commercial wealth, and self-governance. America is the solution to the dilemma of property because it offers an array of economic opportunities. Wollstonecraft's novel, in contrast, concedes that America is a nation of property, but it is far less optimistic about the benefits. For Wollstonecraft, "adoration of property is the root of all evil," and correspondingly, America is not the answer for her troubled character Henry Darnford.⁷ Nonetheless, life without property, especially in the form of self-governance, leaves him vulnerable and victimized; he is trapped in the irresolvable dilemma of property. Finally, Charlotte Smith seems to abandon the struggle altogether when her family of reformers, the Glenmorrises, decides to leave England and embrace exile in America after a series of protracted dealings with the law over family inheritances. Their exile to America, however, is driven in part by the desire to construct a new society in a land that is not yet

⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 7 vols. (New York: New York UP, 1989) 6:1-235.

⁶ Jean-Pierre Brissot, *Nouveau Voyage Dans Les Etat-Unies de L'Amérique Septentrionale, fait en 1788, part J.P. Brissot (Warville) Citoyen François—Travels in the United States of North America* (Paris, 1791).

⁷ Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, in *Works*, ed. Todd and Butler, 6:325.

a nation. It is an act of appropriation that contradicts their efforts to leave the pursuit of property behind them. In the end, none of these novels resolves the paradox of property and subjectivity but their attempts call attention to one of the most significant limitations within contractarianism.

America: The Land of Economic Opportunity

Robert Bage's novel *Hermesprung; or Man As He is Not* is among the most sanguine and confident of the political novels of the 1790s. It is not encumbered by the weight of defeat or the distractions of uncertainty that plague English Jacobin fiction at the end of the decade. It does not bear the often claustrophobic atmosphere of those texts representing "things as they are," in part, because it is presenting "man as he is not," a venture of hope and possibility. Moreover, it is one of the few English Jacobin novels that use a classical comedic structure to expose corruption and advocate reform. The driving force behind this optimism is the protagonist "Hermesprung," who is not only brave, brawny, and debonair but also a great financial success—and an American. He is a celebration of abundance, a cheerful embodiment of property. He is indeed "sprung" from Hermes, the god of commerce, the protector of traders. His triumph over the social forces of evil, which in this novel are the restrictions of outmoded tradition, and his marriage to the lovely Caroline Campinet are the causes of celebration at the close of the text.

In stark contrast to *Hermesprung* is the narrator and alleged author of the story, Gregory Glen, the illegitimate son of an innocent country maiden who is led astray by a young squire. The chaste Ellen Glen, her son tells us, "defended the citadel of her honour all the preceding summer," but had, alas, "surrendered at the close of it, subdued by a too tender heart, and a flowered cotton gown" (2). In spite of the fact that he was "begot" by a gentleman, Glen regards himself the "son of nobody" (1). He bears his father's Christian name but his mother's family name; thus, he reaps little benefit from, and casts no shame on, a family of status and wealth. In addition, Glen is perceived to be the property of others. As he is shifted from caretaker to caretaker (his great grandmother, his great aunt, the parish's Goody Peat, and, finally, Parson Brown), he is assessed for the financial debt he incurs. When he settles with Parson Brown, Glen observes that Brown "considered

me as deodand," a form of chattel that is given over to pious service because it has caused a death (5).⁸ In most legal instances, deodand refers to an animal or a vehicle that might have caused a fatal accident. Pollock and Maitland cite "[h]orses, oxen, carts, boats, mill-wheels and cauldrons" as the most common forms of *deodand*.⁹ Glen, however, presumably acquires this status because his mother died in childbirth and hence he bears the culpability of her loss. His humanity does not exempt him from being cast as chattel; his entire life as the "son of nobody" prepares the way for this culminating image.

Still, Glen's status as the less-than-human property of others does not protect him from the sway of such human impulses as romantic love, as well as the disappointment that often follows. He is soon besotted with affection for Parson Brown's niece, a young woman well trained in the enchantments of dress and educated on romances and novels. When she throws him over for "a young hero, who measured cloth in a neighbouring town," he is devastated and resolves to commit suicide (6). While Glen's life story thus far is certainly a criticism of specific laws—those governing poverty, illegitimate births, and suicide—it also elucidates an assumption of ownership that becomes strikingly evident after Glen is apparently saved from killing himself. Just as Glen is about to exercise his agency by explaining his intention to Mrs. Garnet, who is nursing him, she lectures Glen on the sinfulness of suicide. According to Mrs. Garnet, he tells us, had he been successful, his damnation would have been assured because the great sin was in "considering my life as my own property, and throwing it away when I was weary of it" (8). His suicide would have been an assertion of the self that is not his to assert and an act of disobedience, akin to that of Adam and Eve; Glen himself confesses that he had "eaten of the tree of knowledge and was ashamed" (7). He has attempted to destroy the self to which others had already laid claim.

Glen's tainted parentage and loss of self sets him up as the antithesis to Hermsprong. On the one hand, Glen seems to have

⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "deodand." See also, Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1870) 1:224–25.

⁹ Sir Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland, *The History of English Law*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1898) 1:473.

found a kindred spirit in this man who is also an outsider in the village of Grondale and whose odd and seemingly fabricated name obscures *his* parentage. But the singular difference that will distinguish Hermsprong from Glen and render Hermsprong a hero is his access to property, beginning with his ownership of himself. Whereas Hermsprong is able to embrace self-determination and the natural and civil rights that are due him, Glen is not. In a conversation with Glen, Hermsprong boasts, "I see not the difficulty of man's becoming a judge, tolerably just, of the temper of his mind,... I have energies, and I feel them; as a man, I have rights, and will support them; and, in acting according to principles I believe to be just, I have not yet learned to fear" (98). Glen's response to Hermsprong's self-assurance is one of both admiration and trepidation. Of Hermsprong's "pretensions," he asks, "[i]s this the stuff of which the pride of our people of rank and fashion is made? That it is pride of some sort, I have no doubt; for I, Gregory Glen, the son of nobody, felt myself raised, exalted by it. I almost began to think myself a man. But it is a word of bad augury. Kings like it not; parsons preach it down; and justices of the peace send out their warrants to apprehend it" (99). The dangers to which Glen refers—the controversy over the publication of Paine's *Rights of Man*, the Treason Trials of 1794, and the network of spies that Pitt set loose on the British populous—were very real and serious impediments to the sort of claims to the "rights of man" that Hermsprong espouses. And it was men like Glen who were most vulnerable. Hermsprong, in contrast, was insulated from these fears, and his ambiguous familial history renders him an "everyman" rather than a "nobody" because of his extraordinary access to property and because of his ties to various nations—including America—that make that access possible.

Hermsprong is a composite of national identities. He is born of an English father and a French mother in America, where he was raised until he comes of age at sixteen. While his father gives him an English title (the revelation of "noble" birth at the end of the narrative), and his mother gives him property in France, Hermsprong's upbringing in America affords him his most powerful sense of self. It is what allows him to forego the strictures of formal patriarchalism and proceed on the strength of his individual talent and merit. It is also what provides him with an alternative model of manhood, one that is stronger than the European ver-

sion. Hermsprong uses his mythical name and American connections to establish himself as a different kind of "nobleman" who will challenge the forces of traditional rank and title: the "noble savage." Identifying with the Native Americans, among whom he was raised, would seem to marginalize and isolate Hermsprong in the context of English society. But with the romantic persona of the noble savage comes an assumption of innate power and human potential, two ideals that suddenly seemed within reach in the 1790s. Unlike the European, struggling with the allocation of political authority in a system of civil rights, the primitive figure is untroubled by a division between the individual and the community, the personal and the public, the legal subject and the law. Self-determination is a given; it is not bestowed or withheld by the institutions of advanced civilization. Furthermore, the noble savage is closer to that state of nature where, according to contractarians such as Locke and Paine, those endowed and protected by natural rights decide to form a nation while still maintaining certain benefits of natural law.¹⁰

Significantly, it is not his primitive roots alone that empower Hermsprong. Bolstering his status as a noble savage is his inheritance of "commerce" as a newly respected tradition in its American form. Hermsprong's father, alienated emotionally and financially from his family in England and driven abroad, was a successful fur trader with the Native Americans. He made trade a form of diplomacy and used commerce to bridge the gap between the European world and the "uncivilized" world. He lived among the native inhabitants, learned their language, religion, and philosophy, and in that way "gratified] his ardent desire to know man" and made a good bit of money (166). In the experience of Hermsprong's father, we see one of the most effective manifestations of the transactions of commerce in the midst of a people living in a state of nature.¹¹ Hermsprong's paternal inheritance, therefore, is the ability to act as a conduit between cultures, and he does so, like his father, through the mechanism of property. Though he claims to be "born a savage," Hermsprong's European parentage affords him distance and allows him to consider himself a philosopher, an ob-

¹⁰ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* 330–32; Paine, *Rights of Man* 53–57.

¹¹ The idea of property transactions in a state of nature is also discussed by Locke in his *Two Treatises of Government*. See 301–02.

server of the very culture in which he was raised (73). He then functions as something of an ambassador when he explains and interprets American life to those in England. What enables his travel and independence is wealth (gained through the commerce of his father and the land of his mother) and self-ownership, an assumption that lies behind one of the privileges of his American birth, self-determination.

Although Hermsprong's American upbringing (the combined force of the primitive and the commercial) seems to be the primary source of his extraordinary confidence and power, it is the revelation of his true identity at the end of the novel that completes and solidifies his authority. Hermsprong, we learn, is most definitely not akin to "the son of nobody." His real name is Sir Charles Campinet, and he is the rightful heir to Lord Grondale's estate. It turns out that Hermsprong is an offspring of Great Britain, much like America herself. He is a messenger—thereby fulfilling another aspect of his mythical pseudonym—bearing news of the great potential of man and the lessons learned from an alternative civilization. He denies that America is a utopia, and he concedes to an Englishman that "their government would not do for you," precisely because the wheels of English government are greased with wealth and politicians are addicted to luxury (134). Throughout his ambassadorial discourse, Hermsprong eschews material prosperity and rejects an equation of money with happiness. He depicts America as the land of simplicity and moderation, of "simple plenty, strength, and health" (134). Still, he acknowledges the power of wealth and realizes that it is the source of his independence. He also seems to recognize that it is essential to political authority in England, even in the newly emerging social contract that should incorporate an expansion of the franchise. If Hermsprong is "the new man" endowed with "the rights of man," then the figure of modernity is decidedly a propertied one. As Hermsprong's entire identity unfolds, he becomes the embodiment of all sorts of property: commercial wealth, from his father's trade in America; landed wealth, from his mother in France and Lord Grondale's fortune in England; and lastly, as the undisputed owner of himself, a condition that affords him his "freeborn mind" (73) and sustains him in his efforts to displace the outmoded patriarch. America, rather than the more troublesome revolutionary France, is the site of liberty and this liberty is unequivocally girded by property.

America: The Land of Commerce

In spite of Bage's apparent endorsement of property as the defining factor for enfranchisement in the social contract, he does acknowledge the limitations of this requirement for women. His heroine and counterpart to Hermsprong, Maria Fluart, finds herself restricted rather than freed by wealth. A similar fate awaits Mary Wollstonecraft's protagonist Maria in her unfinished novel *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman*. Here, too, property plays a central role in the struggle for subjectivity and political agency, but it is far more troublesome than it is in Bage's *Hermsprong*. The manipulation of an inheritance by Maria's uncle, to ensure that it bypasses the clutches of her husband, sets into motion the tragic events that lead to Maria's imprisonment in a madhouse and the loss of her daughter. For Wollstonecraft, property is "an iron hand," a "demon," that preoccupies and dominates society, resulting in gross inequalities and tyrannical laws.¹² Nonetheless, proprietorship of the self—a crucial form of property—remained a cornerstone of contractarianism, creating a dilemma for an English Jacobin author who was at the very heart of the campaign for rights.

In Wollstonecraft's novel, as in Bage's, a representation of America provides an opportunity for a discussion of property and self-determination. America appears when Henry Darnford, Maria's love interest, tells the story of his life. Although he was not born in America, nearly all of his narrative takes place there, and, like Hermsprong, it is where he has come of age. But Darnford is a very different creature than Hermsprong. Whereas Hermsprong is "man as he is not" but would hope to be, Darnford is the more realistic "man as he is" that reflects a dark state of existence. Having been kidnapped by unknown assailants, for mysterious reasons, Darnford is confined to a madhouse. There in the prison, Maria (who has also been forcibly incarcerated) falls in love with him, and they exchange the stories of their lives. They are messengers of a sort (like Hermsprong), and they are exercising agency by communicating their personal narratives; however, they converse inside a prison and within constrictions that are diametrically

¹² Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler, 7 vols. (New York: New York UP, 1989) 5:14, 24.

opposed to Hermsprong's exceptional freedom of movement and expression.

America is not a source of liberation or empowerment for Darnford. He is sent there by the British military, after purchasing a commission in a newly-raised regiment, and fights for Britain against the colonists seeking independence. When he is wounded, he has a political change of heart and decides to buy a piece of land and stay on as a resident. Darnford's description of America, however, is coloured by his disillusionment, a process he undergoes when he grows restless in the countryside, travels the vast terrain in a futile search for aesthetic pleasures, and finally wearies of the false and frenetic disposition of the cities. In fact, his unhappiness with America is what propels him back to London and occasions his present crisis. Darnford casts the young nation as a site of broken promises and lost opportunities, a scene of excessive poverty and wealth, and a place of shallow gestures toward cultivation. His depiction of the *nouveau riche* of America is from the perspective of the British gentry and is delivered in a derisive tone.¹³ The wealthy of America, he says, engage in vulgar display for lack of refinement: "the cultivation of the fine arts, or literature, had not introduced into the first circles that polish of manners which renders the rich so essentially superior to the poor in Europe" (45). Perhaps his most biting condemnation of American culture is his image of the American spirit of independence and determination failing to make the transition from the religious prejudice that fueled the revolution to an emancipation of the understanding, a bursting into the light of reason. Instead, the remarkable strength and resolve of the revolutionary colonists turned to commerce, and the figure of the American individual now bears "a head enthusiastically enterprising," and "a cold selfishness of heart" (45).

"Gambling" is how Darnford defines American commerce.¹⁴ With utter contempt, he describes how "[t]he resolution, that led

¹³ Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse discuss the phenomenon of a "second-tier" English aristocracy in America, in *The Imaginary Puritan* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992) 43–44.

¹⁴ Wollstonecraft's association of speculation with America is derived, at least in part, from personal experience. Her brother Charles and her lover Gilbert Imlay both became involved in speculative schemes in America that often failed. See Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Columbia UP, 2000) 197, 232, 260, 290.

them [colonists], in pursuit of independence, to embark on rivers like seas, to search for unknown shores, and to sleep under the hovering mists of endless forests, whose baleful damps agued their limbs" has now devolved into "commercial speculation." Americans are no better than his own English parents, people of fortune who were confined to an unhappy marriage and also turned to gambling. "He was fond of the turf," Darnford explains, "she of the card-table."¹⁵ Although Darnford is not a consistent spokesperson for reformers, his disdain for commerce seems to be an aversion to a world view based on chance, which worked against the universal premises that were being espoused by reformers such as Wollstonecraft herself. Speculation is antithetical to reason.¹⁶ It discards the movements of logic, and the sequences of cause and effect. It ignores first principles, rational inquiry, and several of the arguments reformers and *philosophes* of the 1790s were using to promote an expansion of the franchise. Moreover, while gambling is a circulation of wealth, it is a "hyperactive redistribution" that was at odds with efforts to reallocate wealth through a transformation of the body politic.¹⁷ The novel *Wrongs of Woman* itself makes an attempt to show that nothing is the result of pure chance. There are, in the end, reasons why Darnford and Maria are in such dire situations, and it is the job of the enquirer—the novelist and philosopher—to discover and explain those causes.

When Darnford purchases property in the American countryside, builds a house and plants his crops, he establishes himself as a stable proprietor and thus fulfills a contractarian ideal. But obtaining property does not complete, satisfy or seemingly empower Darnford. We do not see it transform him into a spokesperson for the "rights of man" or a citizen endowed with political authority. The ownership of land breeds restlessness, and the option of commerce is abhorrent to Darnford. When he eventually decides to abandon America, Darnford leaves us with a final image of the fledgling nation as "the land of liberty and vulgar aristocracy, seated on her bags of dollars," and he flies back to London.

¹⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Maria; or the Wrongs of Women* (London: J. Johnson, 1798; New York: Norton, 1975) 44.

¹⁶ Thomas Kavanaugh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 4–5.

¹⁷ *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance* 29–30.

However, only a week after Darnford's return, he is imprisoned. He is "knocked down in a private street, and hurried, in a state of insensibility, into a coach," which brings him to the madhouse where he is now locked up (47). Hence, when Darnford leaves the security of America and returns to England, he is faced with the predicament of a lack of property in the very fundamental form of self-ownership, and this leaves him vulnerable to the law and the outlaw alike. Darnford, like so many women, is in the end caught in the double-bind of property. We are left wondering, in spite of his disparaging depiction of America, whether or not he was better off in the nation of commerce.

America was for Wollstonecraft less a symbol of liberty and more a sign of economic opportunism that corrupted, rather than enhanced, the self. In her representation of America, the fulfillment of subjectivity that is deeply embedded in the American promise is a double-edged sword: necessary for financial independence and political authority, but divisive and oppressive to those without (and there are always those without). America becomes an exquisite example of how the idea that property alone is the basis for freedom is a flawed notion. Still, without property, as we see in the examples of the novel's characters, identity is either imprisoned or denied. Ownership of the self is essential to self-preservation. While Wollstonecraft's novel offers no solution to the dilemma of property and subjectivity, it exposes the difficulties facing contractarians at the end of the eighteenth century.

America: "le vrai beau"

When Charlotte Smith confronts the paradox of property in *The Young Philosopher*, she abandons the struggle—and she does so by pointing her protagonists in the direction of America. But this is not before she too examines the forces of wealth and ownership and, like Wollstonecraft, determines them to be if not demonic then certainly destructive. The Glenmorrises, who are the lost and persecuted reformers in the novel, decide that after a series of trials and tribulations the best solution for their difficulties is exile to America. This self-imposed remove, they conclude, is preferable to continuing a losing battle in Britain and condemning themselves to years of abuse and condemnation. In the Glenmorrises' plan, America is represented as a site of childlike innocence and purity, a territory that barely constitutes a nation. The land of commerce is

recast in aesthetic terms and transformed into a country of "*le vrai beau*," defined as "the great simple."¹⁸ Smith addresses the problem of property through this conversion of America—that is, by denying the value of an ostentatious accumulation of wealth and by turning real property (land) back into the form of landscape, owned by no one but appreciated by all. Yet, in spite of her valiant effort to change the parameters of the struggle by walking away from the pursuit of property, Smith's invocation of America as the solution is a romantic gesture, which does not resolve the problem but rather tries to gloss over the social and political realities of a nation.

Smith's novel, published late in the decade of the 1790s, is encumbered by failed efforts at reform within Britain and the dismal reports coming out of France. It is a review of radicalism at the end of a turbulent and, at times, deeply disappointing decade. As in so many English Jacobin novels, at the heart of nearly all of the struggles within *The Young Philosopher* are disputes over rightful inheritances and the dispersal of family wealth. Before the pursuance of property is abandoned, it is a preoccupation of the central characters. George Delmont, the "young philosopher" of the title, is drawn into a series of frustrating financial and legal entanglements because of his brother's avarice. As a result, he becomes acquainted with the dark figures of property: the lawyers, bookies, and loan sharks. Mr. Glenmorris is the character most often treated as property, as "a bale of goods" (II:239). He is kidnapped, held for ransom, and eventually "bought" (his ransom paid) by friends, only to be imprisoned eventually for debt—his person deemed the equivalent of money owed. Meanwhile, Mrs. Glenmorris is on a quest to obtain her daughter's rightful inheritance from her family, the De Verdons. She proceeds in search of justice but learns that the law's *raison d'être* is the protection of property. What employs the lawyers is the myriad of "claims, liens, demands, and rights ... lying and being in the estates, fortunes, assets and effects, sums of money in government securities, mortgages or bonds, or lands, domains, forests, woods, coppices, parks, warrens, marshes, heaths,

¹⁸ Charlotte Smith, *The Young Philosopher: A Novel*, 4 vols. (London: T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1798) 4:392.

orchards, gardens, or paddocks, commons, rights of common, fee farm and copyholds," and the list goes on (3:56–57).¹⁹

Thus, the action of the novel is driven by characters competing for the rights of ownership. But the pursuance of property, Smith's protagonists find, divides families, isolates individuals, and drags parties into the circular reasoning, confounding discourse, and indefinitely deferring motions of law. Moreover, each pursuit fails. George Delmont's attempts to restore his modest fortune prove to be futile. He never recovers the money he lent his brother and never successfully obtains a large part of his inheritance. Mr. Glenmorris cannot extricate himself from debtor's prison and thereby act with self-governance. It is through the generosity of a cousin that he is finally released. Mrs. Glenmorris's endeavors on behalf of her daughter are not just unsuccessful, they turn out to be dangerous and push her headlong into an emotional and physical breakdown. Striving for property, then, does not seem to be the answer, and property is not the mantle that will be passed on to the succeeding generations in the cases of the Delmonts and the Glenmorrises. By the end of the novel, when the central characters gather together under a cloud of defeat, they must decide how to proceed—and in the instance of Mrs. Glenmorris, it is a matter of the most fundamental form of subjectivity, the preservation of life. When they choose exile to America, they opt to abandon their struggles for property, and, quite significantly, they also try to free subjectivity from the reign of property.

America is the device through which the attempted liberation occurs. And Glenmorris, functioning a bit like Hermsprong, fashions himself America's primary spokesperson. Readers have certainly been set up, thus far, for Delmont's and the Glenmorrises' decision to embrace exile in America. We have been romanced with descriptions of America that render it maybe not the ideal choice but surely the best at hand. Furthermore, the Glenmorrises have already been living in exile in America because of Glenmorris's debt and his political sentiments. Their return to England was only

¹⁹ Smith was executor to her father-in-law's estate and was embroiled in a lengthy legal battle as a result; thus, she experienced first hand the law's preoccupation with property and its propensity to complicate and delay rather than solve and expedite matters. See Loraine Fletcher, *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) 337.

for the purpose of claiming family inheritances, even though it also gave them a chance to reassess their options and reflect on the characters of both nations. The critique of Britain is, expectedly, harsh, though based on history and experience. In contrast, Glenmorris' advocacy of America rests on expectation and vision. His reasons for embracing America are wrapped in future hope and promise, in the unknown, and in the imagination. America's traditional role as a "child" of the mother country renders it only partly formed and therefore a site of possibility and, to some extent, purity. It is a society still waiting to be "raised," to be shaped and molded. In addition, much as Alison Conway observes that, "in radical social theories of the 1790s the child plays a critical role as the image of a citizen as yet unmarked by prejudice or tradition,"²⁰ America in Smith's novel is thought to provide an opportunity to observe unfettered and untainted humanity. Glenmorris sees in America the "great book of nature [, that] is open" to those who wish to engage in "noble study" and examine "human nature unadulterated by inhuman prejudice" (4:392). America is nature, rather than property.

One consequence of the assumption that America is a primitive, and hence unformed, nation is the further supposition that it does not require national loyalty or even legal citizenship. America is poised to welcome those who are "citizens of the world," those who choose to live where they do, according to their principles, not alliances. America serves Glenmorris's idealistic assertion that "wherever a thinking man enjoys the most uninterrupted domestic felicity, and sees his species the most content, *that* is his country" (4:395). He finds in America a chance to reject outright the restrictions and exclusive identifications of nationalism that have in his experience given governments the opportunity to erect borders of all kinds that inevitably result in dividing and victimizing the populace. As a "child-nation" or as no nation at all, America is not in a position to control political authority, to endow only the propertied with rights and leave the financially dependent without autonomy and without protection. It is not equipped to bestow or withhold self-determination, as is the case in Britain. The "state," in Glenmorris's design, is not America but the family itself, which

²⁰ Alison Conway, "Nationalism, Revolution, and the Female Body: Charlotte Smith's *Desmond*," *Women's Studies* 24 (June 1995): 404.

exercises the subjectivity and personal agency of its individual members by choosing its home regardless of the boundaries and limitations of nationalism. "If I have those I love with me," concludes Glenmorris, "is not every part of the globe equally my country?" (4:390).

The final effort to diminish the importance of property, and to lessen its influence on subjectivity, appears in Glenmorris's use of aesthetic terms to describe the American experience. In defending exile to America in a discussion with the Godwinian Mr. Armitage, Glenmorris explains that he derives pleasure from living in a place "where human life [is] in progressive improvement," and, correspondingly, that he suffers repulsion and disgust from witnessing "abject meanness" used "to obtain the advantages of affluence" (4:201–02). A society in which a rapacious citizenry are relentlessly vying for wealth is ugly, a grotesque "spectacle of court figures in hoops and periwigs," whereas a community in which content visionaries seek only personal integrity and happiness is beautiful, an "exquisitely simple Grecian statue" (4:392). To embrace an aesthetic of simplicity, as Glenmorris does, is to reject the supremacy of property. The accumulation of wealth results only in gaudiness; it weighs one down and distorts one's perceptions like the prejudices and prescriptions of previous generations. It also obscures the self, which may emerge in all its elegant glory, fully intact (like a classical statue), when freed from the concerns of property beyond those of self-ownership. The great pleasure of the aesthetic is in the exercise of personal agency, the creative expression of the self. "To cultivate the earth of another continent," Glenmorris joyously declares, "to carry the arts of civil life, without its misery and its vices, to the wild regions of the globe, had in it a degree of *sublimity*" [my italics] (4:210). In the immense physical expanse of a vast uncultivated American landscape, is the blank sheet of white paper that is Locke's articulation of the *tabula rasa*.²¹ It is the infant's mind, on which experience is still to be written, and it is Glenmorris, his family, and other reformers like them who will enjoy inscribing this new society. Therein lies potential and power; therein lies beauty.

²¹ See Book II, Chapter 1, Section 2 of John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1976) 33.

Ultimately, America is "*le vrai beau*," the true beauty, and that is because it represents, for Glenmorris, "the great simple" (4:392), the grand abandonment of property. For America to replace France as the New Jerusalem, as the promising new commonwealth for those seeking *liberté*, it has to be transformed from the land of economic opportunity and the land of commerce to an aesthetic form because the pursuit of property has become such a debilitating problem. However, the effort to depict America as a white sheet of paper, a child-nation, or an amorphous territory that serves as a gathering site for citizens of the world, is a gesture to ahistoricize a political entity, thereby working against one of the principles of contractarianism: an acknowledgement of history and process. The contract that binds the governed to the governors is a product of a single moment in a social and political evolution, and it is subject to change, dissolution, and reformation by each succeeding generation. Glenmorris attempts to bypass process and impose a false point of origin. Moreover, to deny America's history and nationhood—to erase its native settlements, even its invasions and re-settlements—is of course an act of appropriation, one that lands the earnest reformers of *The Young Philosopher* right back in the predicament of property that they sought to flee. The expression of self-determination is still manifest through an act of proprietorship.

None of these English Jacobin novels sheds much light on the nuances, developments, or emerging cultures of America. In fact, any reliable information on the newly independent colonies is strikingly missing. Rather, America serves as a terrain upon which the relationship between property and subjectivity is explored and exposed. The confusion that Smith's novel generates conveys turmoil within the ranks of contractarianism at the turn of the century. The optimism of Bage's Hermsprong turns out to be quite justified; he is the figure—the propertied man—who does well by the social contract. And Wollstonecraft's novel is rightfully grim as it illuminates the difficulties that property poses for some members of the commonwealth; they will be excluded from political agency. In one text, America provides opportunities; in the other, America holds false promise. In Smith's novel, the slate is wiped clean and America is relegated to the imagination—but even there ownership creeps back in, and no one, we discover, is ultimately free from Wollstonecraft's "iron hand" of property.