

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT AND THE SEDUCTION OF THE OTHER

By

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To my father

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The following study is intended to explore the interconnection between the individual psyche and the exterior spaces it moves through and functions in, as well as the implications this relationship holds for culture. In particular, the goal is to examine Mary Wollstonecraft's text *Letters Written During a Short Residence* within the context of the biographical events of her life, her letters, and her political writings to understand her use of the travelogue as a subversive mode of self-determination, one which shattered the ideological constraints of her time. Theories utilized include the Kantian Sublime, Lacanian conceptions of identity, spatial theory, and the structural framework of psychogeography.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

“Never was there a book more calculated to make a man fall in love with its author,” claimed William Godwin of *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, the travelogue written by Mary Wollstonecraft about her journey into the wilds of Norway in 1791. Godwin spoke not only as one fallen under its—and her—spell, but as a fellow writer aware of the subtle undertones of his characterization of Wollstonecraft as *calculating*. Shrewdly successful in his own right, Godwin clearly recognized that the immense and seductive power of Wollstonecraft’s book lay in the relation between narrator and reader, a relation she constructs with an acute self-awareness and a deep comprehension of her intended audience and their potential responses. In unearthing this interpretation of Godwin’s quote, however, one digs up a poltergeist, a ghost of a critique. Just what kind of person *calculates* the equation required to elicit another’s love? A cold and manipulative one, certainly. When one considers that the very *Letters* which sparked Godwin’s ardor and veiled critique were initially written by Wollstonecraft to another man—Gilbert Imlay—whom she spent the better part of three years desperately, suicidally, in love with, Godwin’s jealous jab is perhaps excusable. Yet I believe even Godwin did not grasp the full significance of his interpretative remarks. Wollstonecraft’s many “calculations” which produced her letters, both private epistles written obsessively throughout her life and those revised and published in *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, do not merely bear witness to a subtle seductress attempting to manipulate her readers, whether strangers or lovers. They, in fact, encompass a much more sophisticated, subversive act because their composition and publication are driven by much deeper existential concerns that cannot simply be reduced to a reflexive (sexist) category, (i.e., “seduction”). They reveal a woman attempting to construct an identity unavailable to her, one which transcended contemporary social conceptions of feminine

subjectivity. Calculation, then, is not merely a matter of connivance or seduction, but rather an act crucial to Wollstonecraft's identity formation. It is only by imagining an audience into being, one situated outside socially imposed limitations, capable of recognizing the full narrative range she desires to express, that she is free to articulate—and therefore become—Mary Wollstonecraft.

Historically, Wollstonecraft's revisionary project goes hand in hand with what Juergen Habermas describes as a new openness (*neue Öffentlichkeit*), an expansion of the public sphere resulting from growing middle class demands for self expression and upward mobility. While the philosophical and scientific gains of the Enlightenment helped to liberate individuals from traditional forms of authority they also created new quandaries about social identity, anxieties about life choices. No longer tied to the social class they were born into, individuals were free to enter the public domain where they could compete for recognition and reward; lauded for socio-economic prowess and cultural mastery, an individual advanced in social position accordingly. In the literary domain, this "new openness" is characterized by the rise of new discourses of "self determination," that is, forms of writing like autobiography and the *Bildungsroman* through which readers were exposed to new life choices and conceptions of identity. The term "autobiography," which appears in English in 1800, emphasizes the rise of the "I" (*autos*) in contrast to the traditional "subject" of the confession. For many autobiography critics, Rousseau's *Confessions* represents a turning point in which the confessional was exchanged for a grandstand; the ear of God (or priest), into which solitary confessants once discreetly whispered, now deafened by revelations trumpeted at a vast democratic readership whose responses pronounced final judgment. The result of these new forms of address was a more

personal relation between reader and writer, making it possible for the act of writing to become a form of self-determination in itself.

These shifts in private and public discourse provided an opportunity for women's professional entry into the public sphere, particularly in literature. Increasingly popular modes of confessional and epistolary writing, previously regarded as private, offered a direct conduit between the inner and outer world, between the personal and the political—one which women took full advantage of, after all, they had been trained in these particular modes of writing from childhood on; indeed letter-writing was one of the few universally agreed upon principles of female education at that time. Writers like Mary Hays, for example, capitalized on the epistolary form, going so far as to publish real-life letters between her and a lover. Wollstonecraft, for whom letters were a virtual obsession, found tremendous success when she brought her private style—complete with a trademark casual grammar and expressive punctuation—to the public eye in newspaper articles, reviews, remonstrations, treatises, and most notably, responses to public works written by other writers, Rousseau among them. These works served to shape her public character as a fierce, imposing, brilliant feminist intellectual. It was her most personal work, however—*Letters Written During a Short Residence*—composed of authentic, albeit revised, letters that gave readers, more than a window into her mind, a glimpse at “the history of [her] own heart.” Warning readers that she could not help the “little I” from becoming the hero of each tale, she indicates the intent of her travelogue was not to take her readers on a sight-seeing tour of Scandinavia, but to explore an interior geography mapped upon exterior spaces, defining herself to the world and, in so doing, compelling society to recognize alternate forms of feminine subjectivity which ultimately would enable women to participate in the new social contract.

Just who was Mary Wollstonecraft? It is a question that has bewildered biographers and readers alike for over two centuries. The enigmatic Mary that exists today is no upshot of any living reticence on her part, to be sure.¹ For every thought or feeling Wollstonecraft experienced, she was not content merely to vocalize it—what impermanence!—but compulsively recorded it. Her writing was a stent affixing her mind and heart to the world. In her lifetime she produced, in addition to her published works, countless personal letters, many of which have survived the centuries thanks to key individuals, Godwin foremost among them, who recognized them as valuable glimpses into a brilliant mind. Thus, it is not for lack of footage that Mary Wollstonecraft eludes the contemporary scholar; rather, it is her very nature—its tortuous inner geography—which proves indecipherable for today’s readers.

It is not so much that she *cannot* be understood but rather a problem of what contemporary readers want to make of her. Wollstonecraft is known today as one of the western world’s most influential feminists, courtesy of her fiery social critique, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the text that put her on the Eighteenth-Century map. Talleyrand’s 1791 report suggesting female education be restricted to a domestic scope served as the springboard for Wollstonecraft’s treatise, which demanded equal rights and education for women while criticizing sexual double standards and a culturally constructed feminine emotionality which rendered women socially and politically impotent. This champion of women’s rights would spend her short life writing fiery critiques of contemporary writers, weaving intricate philosophical arguments with her pen, using language to reshape society and the conception of feminine subjectivity—from inside out—and unabashedly countering the extreme, often cruel, public attacks by men—and women—threatened by her views. This same woman moved to Paris

¹ One critic writes about her compulsive letter writing, recording every emotion virtually in real-time.

amidst a revolution, fell passionately in love with the American adventurer and conman, Gilbert Imlay, reconceived her notion of sexual mores, and bore a child out of wedlock. When abandoned by her lover, this same woman set out into the Norwegian wilderness, baby in tow, in an effort to win him back, “hounding” him with letters—letters that complained, rebuked and pleaded in turns, surrendering every shred of dignity, agency and power even while flaunting her brilliance. Letters which make any contemporary reader familiar with Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* cringe with a strange fusion of fury, pain and—undeniably—shame. And, when failing to revive his love, this same woman attempted suicide. Twice. The difficulty that any polemical reading of Wollstonecraft engenders is the inability to bring together the two images—the fearless feminist and the seemingly fragile female—into a single picture of a whole person.

Wollstonecraft’s Scandinavian letters, twenty-six in all, formed the basis for *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Within three months of her return from Scandinavia and recovery from her second suicide attempt, Wollstonecraft revised and published the collection, gaining, with the resulting book’s popularity, a much sought after financial independence. Perhaps its fame can partly be attributed to the passionate and fiery character of its author, rendered less accessible by the commanding, opinionated voice of her other works. *Letters* exposed a vulnerable side, and the contrast immediately drew her readers in. As Mary Hays put it, she felt she came to know Wollstonecraft “as a woman” in reading *Letters*.² Wollstonecraft carefully whittled away the sometimes plaintive, often despairing victim that appeared in her private letters, leaving behind a “sovereign of the waste,” a strikingly sensitive woman wandering the wilds of Norway, soulful, humorous, bewitching—betrayed yet un-accusing, patient and clearly still in love. In short, she became *admirable*. She wrote herself into

² Christine Cheney’s “The Rhetorical Strategies of Tumultuous Emotions” (1)

the character she *felt* herself. It is no wonder that her readers fell in love with her, Godwin among them. The praise predictably soured after her death, when Godwin published the original letters—one can only speculate what Godwin’s motives may have been, but the public’s reaction confirms the marked contrast between the two Mary Wollstonecrafts, a contrast which reveals her careful calculation, her accurate assessment of her targeted audience, and the revisionary nature of autobiography. I believe this calculated revisionary act, the conscious shaping of the relation between Wollstonecraft and her readership and projected Other,³ to be of primary importance in understanding her life which seems, at first glance, to be at war with her work, and to realize the full potential of the legacy she left us.

Others have disagreed, however. The complexity of *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, the events surrounding it and the woman who wrote it, have ensured its contemporary critical notice; close to sixty books and essays have constructed a veritable maze of interpretation around it, complete with false starts and dead ends. Some have defined the text as a travelogue and examined her relation to the Scandinavians, their culture and geography; others have focused on capitalism⁴, the Sublime, feminine subjectivity,⁵ still others on autobiography and revision,⁶ on death, melancholia⁷ and—perhaps most convincingly—desire⁸ Most have examined, to

³ The “Other” has appeared in several critical contexts, in Post-Colonial and Feminist theory as a term for the marginalized, for example. When I speak of the “Other,” it is in Lacanian terms.

⁴ Anthony Pollock’s “Aesthetic Economies of Immasculation: Capitalism and Gender in Wollstonecraft’s *Letters from Sweden*”

⁵ Sara Mills’ “Written on the Landscape: Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Letters*”

⁶ Margot Beard’s ““Wither am I wandering?” A journey into the Self—Mary Wollstonecraft’s travels in Scandinavia, 1795”

⁷ Beth Dolan Kautz’s “Mary Wollstonecraft’s Salutatory Picturesque: Curing Melancholia in the Landscape”

⁸ Eleanor Ty’s ““The History of My Own Heart”: Inscribing Self, Inscribing Desire in Wollstonecraft’s *Letters from Norway*”

varying degrees, the book within the context of Wollstonecraft's life, a logical step, considering the personal nature of the letters and her reasons for undertaking the journey through Scandinavia. Eleanor Ty, for example, defines Wollstonecraft's bodily experience of the world as a "contact zone," a 'real' place to begin reading. Yet, in "Aesthetic Economies of Immaculation: Capitalism and Gender in Wollstonecraft's Letters from Sweden," Anthony Pollock suggests that the bulk of criticism surrounding the text has done Wollstonecraft a disservice by concentrating on her personal relations. He writes:

one of Wollstonecraft's more recent biographers frames the *Letters* as a mode of economically motivated "seduction" with the national audience functioning implicitly as a sympathetic surrogate for Gilbert Imlay...In the end, both accounts reduce the *Letters* to a biographically explicable symptom of Wollstonecraft's personal need to elicit love and/or money from her readers...If we wish to understand the letters more or different than a seduction of the reading public, we can begin by comparing its analytical priorities and procedures with the rest of her...works. (Pollock, 2)

Pollock contests the *personal*. He suggests that a preoccupation with Wollstonecraft's emotional life and her "personal need[s]," which he attributes to Godwin's framing of the work "not as a sustained critique of modern penal institutions but as a work which directly addresses an atomized, gendered readership in romantic terms which 'irresistibly seizes the heart'" (2), blinds readers to what he argues is the main point of the text: the "construction of a masculine mode of subjectivity that often gets conflated with a "universal" kind of self, the subject of enlightened mercantile capitalism, associated with the public sphere of political economy, print culture and the law." (2) While Wollstonecraft certainly utilizes and critiques narratives of subjectivity traditionally defined as masculine, I contend that the "romantic terms" of her work and the "personal needs" which fuel them play equally important roles in her political vision.

Pollock's ideas on Wollstonecraft's Sublime and her conscious construction of subjectivity coincide with my own argument, but I wholly disagree with his conclusion that her emotional existence and her calculated seduction of the reader detracts from, or is even separate from identity construction and socio-political critique. Pollock, like many Wollstonecraft critics, seems to view her "personal need" for love as a psychological weakness in an otherwise brilliant thinker, the hairline fracture responsible for the ultimate destruction of her psyche. It is on this point which the *Vindicator* herself requires vindication. I believe that the "Great Mind" Pollock seems to be defending against the "Great Heart" which a host of scholars have been preoccupied with—and in many cases have done a disservice too—are, in fact, one and the same. It is the arbitrary division between the two which prevents scholars from recognizing the full scope of Wollstonecraft's vision, a culturally imposed separation between intellect and emotion which, ironically, Wollstonecraft herself struggled with.

"A man has been termed a microcosm; and every family might also be called a state,"⁹ claimed Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication*. What she meant was that every person embodies—literally—the society they live in. Our identity is fashioned from and within the ever-shifting yet tenaciously inflexible ideological contexts which structure our world. She later wrote in *Letters*, "we reason deeply, when we forcibly feel" (160), demonstrating in life, as in writing, the same unwavering belief. For Wollstonecraft, everything was personal. Despite a lifelong struggle to separate her irrepressible private emotional life from her public political pursuits in order to prove herself to an intellectual community that had its roots in the rational-minded Enlightenment, Wollstonecraft eventually recognized the inseparability of feeling and thought. Moreover, she understood that emotion, as the currency of the individual life, collectively

⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Chapter 12)

composed the forces responsible for large-scale ideological shifts that served as the subject of rational philosophical and even scientific study. Not only was the daily design of the individual experience constructed by the overarching socio-political structure, but reflectively, they helped produce and perpetuate it, a fact which not only renders emotion profoundly significant in the political realm, but defines it as a source of power in the conscious and unconscious shaping of history. For Wollstonecraft, the strength of her social commentary and the brilliance of her political acumen, like any great thinker, stem from the power of her personal convictions, generated by experience and emotion as much as from reason. Her daily encounters with injustice, the societal norms which denied her a recourse to power and independence, her thwarted desires, fired her to argue for the rights of women, educational reform and the revision of political ideologies to create a more just society. It was her capability of feeling which *required* her to deconstruct the political and poetical world, recalculate and rebuild it. For this reason, *Letters Written During a Short Residence* must be interpreted within its living, breathing context. Wollstonecraft's work was an extension of her life; thus, her brilliance lies in the intimate relation between the two. Only with a view that encompasses both can we fully realize the vision she embodies and expresses and realize its potential insights into the human condition. I believe the very "seduction" of the public which Pollock contests is a political act in itself.

In the deluge of criticism, three essays stand out as particularly valuable to my interpretation of the text. First, Syndy McMillan Conger acknowledges Wollstonecraft's literary power to be born of her deep-seated emotional life in, "The Power of the Unnamed You," which begins with a reference to Catherine N. Park's suggestion that Wollstonecraft's aim was to "get herself both more into and more out of her work, which is to say, to write both more and less personally" (Buss, 43). Conger writes that Wollstonecraft "wove fictions into her life and her life

into her fictions,” and pursued “lifelong projects of literary confession and self-fictionalization,” that the “haunting liminal quality of her texts’ (105)...“constitute or reveal the authorial subject, gesturing from the textual threshold toward some shadowy but intensely personal emotional life beyond the text” (Conger, 43). Following these remarks, Conger presents us with a study of the role of personal pronouns in shaping the readers’ response to *Letters*, highlighting the opposition of the sympathetic ‘I’ and the alienated (and alienating) ‘you’, a dynamic strategically constructed by Wollstonecraft that aligns readers with her narrator and requires them to step outside the structure of the text, blurring the boundary between fiction and (imagined) reality. Yet without herself contextualizing *Letters* within the events that inspired it, Conger falls short of recognizing the significance of the relationship between reader and narrator that Wollstonecraft consciously cultivates.

Christine Cheney’s “The Rhetorical Strategies of Tumultuous Emotions,” offers a more substantial reading, exploring the “complex interrelationship between a confessional discourse of selfhood, a heightened and affective discourse of the sublime in nature, and an under-examined aspect of the ideological rhetoric of political and cultural change...link[ing] ideology and rhetorical authority in the site of her literal body in a way that entirely remakes the tradition of writing the self.” (1) Finally, in “The History of My Own Heart: Inscribing Self, Inscribing Desire,” Eleanor Ty uses psychoanalysis to reveal that “what impels and haunts the narrative is woman’s desire,” suggesting that the rewriting of the letters for publication transformed “Wollstonecraft’s emotional dependence and personal grief into a public confrontation with social corruption” (Ty, 101), creating a text which “articulated” and “inscribed” female subjectivity. For Ty, Imlay is merely representative of an unnamed desire, one that she ultimately attempts to express in her rewriting of the original letters.

My interpretation of *Letters Written During a Short Residence* fuses the ideas presented in Cheney and Ty's essays in particular, and finds, in their intersection, unexplored ground. Cheney's "confessional discourse of selfhood" intimately bound up with the Sublime and a rhetoric of political change, and Ty's elusive female desire for a mode of being, displaced onto a lover, are actually circling the same core idea: that it is a desire for self-determination in a society that denies women agency which drives Mary Wollstonecraft's writing. Furthermore, Conger's emphasis on the role of the reader's response to a text which aims to "constitute[s] and reveal[s] the authorial subject," hints at a crucial piece in the puzzle: identity construction is by no means a solitary act. Wollstonecraft's conception of self-determination necessarily fuses an inner, private life with an outer, public world of social discourses, the 'I' and the 'You'; to define the private identity she desires (yes, *feels* herself to be), Wollstonecraft must construct a public identity powerful enough to transform society's conception of the feminine, thereby creating the conditions necessary for her own existence. It is only when a society is capable of recognizing a subject that it can fully exist.

While to many the private and public writings of Mary Wollstonecraft seem to display two different characters—one a fiery feminist demanding power and autonomy, the other a broken woman, needy and forsaken—I contest that she is, in fact, remarkably consistent: we find, embedded in every aspect of her life and writing, her desire to become *Mary Wollstonecraft*, her wish to construct an identity beyond the constraints of feminine subjectivity as it existed at the time. Identity formation is a fundamentally social act; it requires a surface perceived to be outside of and separate from ourselves reflecting back to us what we present. To conceive ourselves, we must imagine how we look from another's eyes, and therefore we must first dream up that "Other." Most often it is an unconscious act, invisibly hardwired to our

thought processes, a methodical subliminal collecting of responses to us in our surroundings, with corresponding involuntary adjustments to our body language, our words, our actions. Yet there are some, particularly those who recognize a disparity between what is reflected back and what they desire to communicate, who practice a cognizant self-determination. *Letters Written During a Short Residence* is arguably Wollstonecraft's most important text for this very reason; it represents her ultimate calculation: the conscious re-imagining of her Other in order to shatter cultural constraints that restricted her narrative identity and ultimately reconstruct the social world from within. The seduction of this Other—or, in other words, the construction of a new social identity and re-conception of feminine subjectivity—is Wollstonecraft's personal and political act of self-determination.

As *Letters* and the events it represents are the fulcrum around which Wollstonecraft's transformation pivots, it is through their intersection that I intend to examine her process of self-determination and reconstruction of cultural conceptions feminine subjectivity. My inquiry is structured into three parts. In the first, *My Invisible Friend: Desire, Feminine Subjectivity and the Romantic Other or Reading Mary Wollstonecraft*, I scrutinize her affair with Gilbert Imlay as the continuation and amplification of a lifelong pattern in which she imagines a romantic interest (male and female) into a God-like Other, defining her identity in relation to this fictional Supreme Being, the relational structure explicitly designed to free her intellectually and emotionally from existing social fetters. Obviously problematic—despite the intangible nature of Wollstonecraft's God, the power is imbued in its Papal form and clearly no single person should retain that much power over another, however willingly bestowed—I intend to show how and why the inability of the individuals to fulfill her expectations and the resulting collapse of the structure Wollstonecraft painstakingly constructed, threatened her very existence. The

disintegration of her relationship with Imlay led Wollstonecraft to her Scandinavian journey, a seemingly paradoxical attempt to win him back and reconfigure her identity in terms of a new Other. This leads to my second section, *To Be or Not to Be: Suicidal Longings and Traumatic Landscapes* or *Into the Wasteland*, I use the theory developed in the first section to read her original letters and examine her decision to journey northward as an attempt both to resuscitate and transcend her recreant and defecting god. My goal in this section is to read, as sensitively as we can, Wollstonecraft's state of mind and aims at the time she set out on her journey, in order to see the world through her eyes at the apex of her pain. My third section, *(Re)Visionary Autobiography*, will perform a close reading of her revised and published travelogue in order to do just what Pollock contests: explore her seduction of the reading public, not simply as a "sympathetic surrogate for Imlay," but as a projection of the ultimate Other, one calculated and constructed—or rewritten—by Wollstonecraft to enable her to articulate the full range and depth of her vision. This third section is, itself, divided into three sub-sections which examine first, her self-construction for her reader through a psychogeographic relation to landscape; second, her subtle critique of capitalism as the source of feminine subjugation at the personal and political levels; and third, her use of Romantic Tropes—particularly the Sublime—to transcend imposed cultural limitations through the creation of an incalculable feminine subject. Ultimately, I propose to examine her use of travel writing to shatter the ideological constraints of her time and become *Mary Wollstonecraft*.

CHAPTER 2
READING MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT *OR*
MY IMAGINARY FRIEND: DESIRE, SUBJECTIVITY AND THE ROMANTIC OTHER

Wollstonecraft began her social revolution long before *Vindication* ever hit the presses; its driving force—her desire—characterized her earliest patters. “Tumultuous emotions” (132-3) were all too familiar to Wollstonecraft, despite the fact that she spent the better part of her early intellectual years subverting emotion in favor of reason. Her emphasis on rational thought throughout her early adulthood was, in part, a critique on a very real form of social control of women, one which, by portraying and therefore teaching women to be highly sensitive and emotional, diminished their ability to reason as well as the public’s confidence in their rationality, leaving them little recourse to power in the public sphere of the rational-minded Enlightenment. Furthermore, the powerful emotions attributed to women were diffused by social narratives, romance novels and female education for instance, and funneled into “safe” (i.e., impotent) forms of feeling. The vital forces of anger and despair were twisted into socially acceptable forms of articulation like fainting and weeping and thus rendered powerless; with careful training potent sexual desire was rerouted into the art of flirtation, a strategic game played exclusively to win husbands and debase other women in order to increase social status and ensure economic security. Wollstonecraft publicly and vehemently fought this form of social control by seeking to destroy any seeming correlation between femininity and emotionality. She may also have emphasized logic and practiced a rigid rationality as a reaction to the depths—and turbulence—of her own individual emotional life.¹ As controlled as her public writings were, her personal relationships and states of mind, as represented in her private letters, were subject to

¹ Her pronounced emotions and sensitive nature were by no means a product of her identification with the social representation of her gender, rather it is a result of genetics and individual brain chemistry. Members of her family of both sexes shared her stormy nature and penchant for despair, her extreme emotional highs and lows.

emotional extremes, ranging from the heights of worshipful love, to obsessive focus, to severe depression, to despairing disillusionment, unrelenting hope and undeniably a strikingly sudden capacity for happiness and humour, at once deep and light. Her emotional brilliance was unmatched by the vast majority of her intellectual equals, Godwin among them. As with any extreme ability, it was a double-edged sword, source of pleasure and pain in equal measure.

The intensity with which she experienced the world inevitably characterized her relationships, friendships and romances alike; she was all or nothing—one might rightly call her obsessive. From childhood onward she tended to single out an individual she believed to be kindred in some way, attempting to establish a relationship with them that fulfilled her intellectual and emotional needs. Beginning with Jane Arden at age twelve, to whom she snapped, when slighted at a tea party, “I must be first or none at all,”² this pattern continued into her teenage years with a possessive love for Fanny Blood. Her close relationship to the Blood family soured after Fanny’s death when, through letters, it became increasingly apparent that the Bloods did not meet Wollstonecraft’s standards for intellectual refinement and good character. As an adult Wollstonecraft entered higher intellectual circles and immediately took to Henri Fuseli, a moody, married Swiss artist. So entranced was she that she disregarded propriety and accepted social mores and requested that Mrs. Fuseli allow her to enter into a platonic “ménage à trois” with them, in order to have round-the-clock access to his mind. She was denied, and the letters which she would occasionally send Fuseli over the years remained unopened and unreturned. At first glance such a list may seem to suggest an emotionally dependent, somewhat unstable bent in Wollstonecraft’s character—an interpretation I contest as oversimplified analysis which only scratches the surface of a deeper psychological process. What it does prove,

² From Janet Todd’s *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*

however, is that Wollstonecraft's life was directed and determined primarily by a potent desire, which, if we recall Ty's point, is a "demand for... undying love, [that] is always addressed to an Other, and falls short of what one needs....[which] is really for something else, for the next thing the other can give," and which "requires the affirmation of an ego by the other to such a degree that only an imaginary union or identification with them, an identity they share, could bring satisfaction" (Ty, 71-2). Wollstonecraft's obsessive desire for these individual Others—for recognition from them—is ultimately representative of something else.

This list of events leads us to her affair with Gilbert Imlay. The painfully public psychological fallout of the Fuseli incident drove her to seek refuge in Paris, where she struck up an affair with Imlay, who appeared a dashing American writer and explorer but could more accurately be termed a deserter, outlaw, and conman. Clandestine meetings at the Barrier—the toll bridges—of Paris, long afternoons in the parklands of Neuilly in which they planned their future together; their love story was literally the eye of the storm, a haven both from Wollstonecraft's lifelong struggles and the horrors of the French Revolution, and perhaps also heightened because of them. Winter found Wollstonecraft alone in Paris with a newborn daughter, awaiting Imlay, who had left for London on a shifty business venture that would secure their future. By spring thaw, the slow realization had dawned on Wollstonecraft, letter by letter, that Imlay had deserted them and, despite continuing to give her some hope of their reunion, had no intention of returning to Paris. Not one inclined to passivity, she travelled to London with hope of reconciliation and instead found him in the middle of an affair with an actress. Her first suicide attempt followed. Within days of her recovery, she set off for Scandinavia in search of Imlay's stolen mercantile ship purportedly filled with silver, with a letter from him introducing her as his best friend and wife, and a promise of their reunion in Germany at the close of her

journey. Predictably, there was no reunion; when she returned to London after six months in Scandinavia and found him living with yet another actress she threw herself into the Thames, almost succeeding in her second suicide attempt. Wollstonecraft was intense but not unreasonable. She would not have attached her ego so thoroughly to Imlay unless he had given her due cause. Yet that is beside the point. These, some of the most extreme and formative events of her life, are the foundation on which *Letters Written During a Short Residence* are written. Gilbert Imlay was necessary to Wollstonecraft, so much so, in fact, that her previous friendships, which certainly followed a similar pattern, paled in comparison. Considering her suicide attempts, it was clearly a relationship that her very *being* depended upon. To reconcile this relationship—and her personal feelings, letters and actions—with her professional revolutionary writings and an undeniable, incomparable moral truth, we must examine her desire in Lacanian terms and investigate theories of identity formation and gender within an historical context.

If Imlay, et al. are a simulacrum for Wollstonecraft's desire, what do they stand in for? Despite Ty's assumption that this, the central question of her argument, is unanswerable, I believe the answer is deceptively simple: Wollstonecraft's desire for an Other ultimately represents a desire *to be herself*. To comprehend the link between the Other and identity construction, we must conceptualize Self and Other, not as two distinct identities but as part of a single model of subjectivity. Here Lacan's conceptualization of the "formation and the function of the I"³ can be very helpful. According to Lacan, somewhere in the ninth through twelfth month of life a child enters the "Mirror Stage," signaled by the sudden visual identification with its own bodily image. The very instant this identification—an image on which all subsequent developments of the ego are based—is established, the potential for alienation, loss, and/or

³ Jacque Lacan's *Ecrit* NY. W.W. Norton (1977)

fragmentation of self is born.⁴ It is the fear of fragmentation as much as the desire for totality which drives us toward language; and in our accession to language, as Lacan theorizes, we are “alienated into the signifying chain,” our subjectivity instinctively seeking to replicate the illusion of totality within the fictional construct of social signifiers, our imagination necessarily blurring the ragged edges of existence so that symbols may be perceived as the reality they stand in for. It is this process which makes the social production of reality—and our participation in it—possible. The problem is that the signifying chain is *not* reality, and as a temporal and spatial construction it cannot wholly convince us that it is. The recompense, of course, is that we are no longer alone. The Mirror Stage and our subsequent alienation into the world of symbols not only makes communication possible, but requires us to translate the formless, inexpressible identity we feel to exist into a shared illusory yet concrete structure in so far as language is the material support of social being, automatically and conditionally establishing our existence in relation to others. Words serve as a kind of “acoustic mirror” reflecting our selves back to ourselves, the lifeline tying us to a social symbolic structure that enables us to reconstitute our sense of wholeness in relation to others; the drive to learn language, then, is as strong as and inexorably tied to the instinct to survive.

Crucial to my examination of Wollstonecraft’s struggles with subjectivity, the fact must be noted that the instant a child views herself in the mirror and recognizes—thus losing—her sense of herself as a totality, she has momentarily become the Other. As Hegel says in his *Phenomenology*, “The self has come outside of itself. This has a double significance. First it has lost its own self, since it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, it has thereby sublated that other, for it does not regard the other as essentially real but sees its own self in the other” (229).

⁴ For Lacan, “the fragmented body” is a fundamental psychological category.

For Lacan, this internalization of the Other is essential to our reconstruction of identity: we become alienated from ourselves and symbols (that is—language) becomes the means of re-establishing our sense of ourselves in relation to this other. Yet it is only by inhabiting the Other that we can recognize the boundaries of Self. Subjectivity, then, is an *intrasubjective relationship* between one's Self and an inner Other that is projected onto as much as fashioned from the outside world; we are only aware of the existence of the former by our experience of the latter's reaction to it, in a relationship established and expressed through symbols: language, images, signs, sound, movement—an immense socio-symbolic network of signs—endless, frustrating, nascent. Identity as we know it, then, is fundamentally a social relationship, even in the privacy of one's own psyche. To exist, we require an Other: a friend, an enemy, an audience. Even in solitude, when we think ourselves decidedly alone, the Other is there, invisibly hardwired into our thoughts. Sometimes conflated with God; often wearing a familiar face, a loved one dead or living, or none at all; perhaps we are blissfully unaware of it. We might call it our “invisible friend.” We require these others to live in our own minds, so that we may momentarily inhabit them—our projections, the mirror image of our total self, and by inhabiting them, we may recognize ourselves.⁵

The literary world has a subtle but long tradition of invisible friends. Goethe's elusive Beautiful Soul, Johanna Von Klettenburg, found one in “Jesus,” for example. This figure of the Other first appears in Werther, when he speaks of an unnamed “friend of his youth”:

Alas, that the friend of my youth is gone! Alas, that I ever knew her! I should say to my self: You are a fool to search for something that cannot be found on this earth. But she was mine, I felt her heart, her great soul, in whose presence I seemed to be more than I really was because I was all that I could be. Good God, was there a single force in my soul then unused? Could I not unfold in her presence all the

⁵ “In the spectacle of the world we are looked-at beings.” Jacque Lacan's *Ecrit* (1977)

wonderful emotions with which my heart embraces Nature? Was not our relationship a perpetual interweaving of the most subtle feeling with the keenest wit, whose modifications, however extravagant, all bore the mark of genius? And why not?—Alas, the years she had lived in advance of my own brought her to the grave before me. I shall never forget her—neither her unwavering mind nor her divine fortitude. (10)⁶

When this “great soul” reappears in the “Beautiful Soul” chapter of *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, she too has an “invisible friend”—Jesus. The boundaries between literary and real-life invisible friends have a tendency to blur. Author Padgett Powell has written of his imaginary friend, who appeared, wearing a fuzzy pink bathrobe, while he lay in a hospital bed in Paris, grappling with malaria. Large as life, talkative, real; he disappeared as suddenly and completely as he’d come. Imaginary friends are common and indispensable, particularly to children. Growing up, two of my brothers—twins—each had a red-headed, rascally mate named Pete (not the same person, I was told in no uncertain terms), and we often had two extra place settings at our already crowded dinner table. Through some remarkable coincidence, my father met and befriended Shakespeare at age twelve, spending a few afternoons intellectually sparring with the bard. I am loathe to admit my own unseen life, for no doubt such relationships speak volumes. Ill-contented with a single, loving or admiring friend, I was queen of an invisible land—named after a cheese—full of invisible subjects. The aspirations to grandeur, the limitations this sad chapter of my history might suggest, I shudder to analyze. Pseudo-confessionals aside, the gravity with which these relationships are entered into by children, suggests their authenticity and the important role they play in identity formation. It is not difficult to comprehend that, in a world where adults determine the parameters of existence, an invisible friend, constructed by the child for the child, offers him a sense of power and control

⁶ Wolfgang Von Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*

over his own self-perception. The invisible friend is designed to overrule the Other built-in by parents, siblings, society, allowing the child to recognize—and determine—himself beyond the immediate constraints of his existence.

As we grow older we internalize our imaginary friend(s), incorporating them into our inner Other, ever expanding and refining them since that first glance into the mirror. Playing such a crucial role in identity formation and expression, this Other begs closer examination: produced within our subconscious⁷ from the raw material demands of our own physical, emotional, and intellectual experience, an intricate framework of cultural symbols of and values for, and encounters with real-life Others (parents, friends, enemies, teachers, gods, writers, artists, etc.) which have been sieved through the screen of sensory consciousness and re-ordered, spliced together by our imagination in Frankensteinish fashion, destructive and creative forces necessarily working in tandem. One pictures a mad scientist within us raising a monstrous Other, and, as a product of human nature, they very well can be—demons are as real now as they ever were pre-Enlightenment. Conversely, they can be idealized others, loving, beautiful; they can be both or all or none. One might alternatively view this process of Othering as a highly reactive chemistry experiment: unpredictable, now shockingly complicated, now painfully simple, as potentially dangerous as they are promising. These Others expect things of us, sometimes even demand them: perfection, self-preservation, creativity, safety, excitement, pleasure; they can get frighteningly specific.

In his “Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,” Lacan phrases it this way:

Who, then, is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my own identity it is still he who agitates me?

⁷ For some it even becomes a conscious process.

His presence can be understood only at a second degree of otherness, which already places him in the position of mediating between me and the double of myself, as it were with my counterpart.

If I have said that the unconscious is the discourse of the Other (with a capital O) it is in order to indicate the beyond in which the recognition of desire is bound up with the desire for recognition.

In other words this other is the Other that even my lie invokes as a guarantor of the truth in which it subsists. (172)

For Lacan, existence can only be understood in the relation between varying degrees or dimensions of Otherness.

No matter how you envision this invisible process, the nature of these Others within ourselves is critical to identity formation. With the sudden recognition of Self, the accompanying requisite inhabiting—and internalization of—the Other, along with the subsequent alienation into the signifying chain, the Mirror Stage marks the permanent re-structuring of the psyche into a social relationship. We are no longer fully secure in the existence of the Self except in relation to this Other. To comprehend the implications of this, let us return to the metaphor of the acoustic mirror, where language⁸ expresses the existence of the otherwise invisible division of self and other: as words in themselves cannot bear witness, they require another entity to not only hear them but *understand* them. It is the proverbial tree falling in the woods and I contest that, while the sound waves exist as surely as the tree falling does, in order to sound it must collide with an eardrum. If language is the sonar sent out from the Self, the internal Other acts as the concrete form (in-so-far as it is fashioned from real-world, socially recognized forms) against which the invisible sonar waves collide. Sounding, it simultaneously detects the shape of the outside unit and communicates its source. It is easy to conceive of this process in the actual social exchange:

⁸ Language standing for any form of communication (i.e., any series of symbols on the Signifying Chain).

we encounter another person, we communicate some version of our selves (or the symbolic equivalent) via language (and the semiotics of gesture, body language, facial expressions, intonation), we see the other person react when they encounter this “sonar,” and from the counter-sonar we receive we make assumptions about who they are and who they think we are. We often idealize the Other in anticipation of an expected idealized response from them, but this is usually temporary; in most cases we quickly mutually readjust our expectations downward. It is by these series of daily exchanges that we socially shape our identity. Yet the gaps in between social exchanges do not signal a sudden cessation of existence; we never stop being ourselves. That is where the internal Other, hardwired into our subconscious, comes into play. The moment we enter the Mirror Stage and become socially re-constructed beings, the internal ideal creature begins to take shape, one which—as the product of it—has the capability of understanding the inexpressible depths of our interior; it is our internal social relation to this imaginary entity that secures our private knowledge of our existence.

Being imaginary, however, these internal Others are fundamentally unstable and they leave us unsatisfied. Perhaps it is because they lack bodies precluding a significant dimension of human communication, or perhaps because we are not entirely convinced—they are, after all, only a projection of our psyche; they are not truly Other. Regardless of why, we (or most of us) require some form of engagement with the social world. I would argue, however, that our relation to our internal Other sets the precedent for every subsequent relation in the Real, defining the limits of our “horizon of Otherness.” Freud offers evidence of this, suggesting that our interpretation of the world as an adult is shaped almost exclusively by our childhood experiences. Every thrill of pleasure is an echo of former joy; behind every momentary breathlessness sings an invisible childhood enthusiasm; when we come up against a sudden wall

of pain, it is our childhood disillusionments, crystallized in memory, which structure its bulwark. Our first relationships, according to Freud's theory of transference, shape our interaction with each and every person we encounter later in life. In this context, our relation to our internal Other, formed by our earliest experiences, determines every subsequent relationship. In projecting them onto real counterparts, however, we are continually forced to revise, as each unexpected reaction, each encounter potentially exists outside the bounds of our imagination. Ultimately, we seek in family, friends, lovers, someone who, like our ideal Other, has the capability of understanding—and thus confirming the existence of—our subjectivity which is inexpressible. Inevitably, Otherness is not Self and no one truly has the capability of total understanding, any more than symbols can become what they represent. But the constant attempt to circle closer to the true essence is the business of being human. If we understand Lacan's notion, "L'ame, Ame, L'Ame" or Soul souls for Soul, then perhaps we may understand romantic love as approaching this ideal relation. In such a libido-driven pairing, the imagination of both Others surpass each others' imaginary versions, and a reflective "mutual recognition" takes place in which each becomes aware of the possibility of totality or transcendence unacknowledged until that moment. As a Sublime friendship, love is as close as we come to true understanding, to a climactic collapsing of Self and Other both within and without.

Something need be said of the symbols by which we construct these intrasubjective identities. Once alienated into Lacan's Signifying Chain, we must internalize the entire social field of signification; our intrasubjective relation to our Other functions within an interior topography which necessarily mirrors the external geography of culture, however distorted by the deeper geothermic pressures of being. We communicate with our Others using external symbols that we have appropriated and internalized, taking up cultural discourses and adapting

them to our own uses. Our private conception of subjectivity emerges from this unstable relation within its liminal topography.

Thus, something further need be said of narrative patterns and the symbols we use to construct them, which keep comprehension of interiority just within and just outside of our reach. As building blocks symbols require structure to function, and can be grouped into increasingly complex forms of organization; as a byproducts of evolution, however, the human mind instinctively reduces them to the simplest terms necessary to communicate any given idea. As architects of our social identity, then, we utilize symbol structures—not only words and images, but the narrative patterns built with them—which have been developing for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. These cultural narratives—so-called for their function in the process of character creation and story-telling, and relational nature of the author/reader or teller/listener dialectic—offer their own sets of symbols, a specialized language that signals both members and nonmembers of its group, often with very different meanings. These narratives, shaped under the pressure of desire, increase in complexity, break off and regenerate themselves, interlocking, until culture resembles something akin to chaotic yet functional clockwork. We utilize these narrative patterns to represent the terms of our existence, identifying ourselves with corresponding symbols that support these narrative structures: tattoos, piercings, jewelry, clothing fashions, hair styles. Existing simultaneously in an intangible—internalized—symbolic structure and in the concrete world, these corporeal signifiers act as totems which prove the existence of an otherwise ethereal subject by allying them with and demonstrating their commitment to a particular social group. Regardless of whichever group(s) they choose to publicly join, they are, in effect, identifying the subject to both an outside social Other and its internalized counterpart.

The problem with narrative patterns, however, is the problem of the symbol: they don't wholly represent the reality of individual experience. As a partial representation, there is always a residual "lack" or falling short of meaning, felt but unexpressed, a feeling that must be repressed or ignored. The more oversimplified a narrative is, the more it asks the individual to repress, the more distant and tenuous the connection between the authentic interior of the individual and his or her external expression.⁹ Cultural narratives can become close-circuited patterns, functioning—much like the insane individual—with their own identifiable logic, yet utterly divorced from a larger social context. Contemporary examples range from Tea-Party cults, to fashion models with twenty-two inch waists and five inch heels, to diehard NFL fans who never miss a game—even on their own wedding day. The narratives which produce these extreme examples operate under a network of symbols reduced to the simplest stereotypes; they manufacture cowboys and gangsters, cheer-leaders and hipsters, each with its own accompanying ideological markers and language to signify membership to the corresponding social club. These contemporary ready-made identities have grown up along fault-line of false and restrictive forms of gender construction, however. The danger is, of course, that such extreme conformist-based subjectivities thrive on repression and marginalization of difference. We all possess traits and experiences that do not wholly fit these categories, but in order to convince society and ourselves that we belong, we suppress and attempt to erase anything that exists "out of bounds" Gender performance, for example, requires men to relinquish emotionality and women to renounce agency, among other things. Yet, if we constantly reduce ourselves to the simplest stereotypes, we begin to exist in the outside world merely as stock characters, efficiently performing our part in what can fast become a great cultural farce.

⁹ Hegel identifies these as forms of false consciousness.

Furthermore, despite our attempts at erasure, suppression cannot fully eradicate the existence of these artificially-produced extraneous performances of our interiority; unacknowledged, they pose a constant threat to our sense of wholeness, rotting the sills of our well-crafted illusion and rendering complete collapse a very real possibility. The violence with which people defend some of the most extreme narratives offers the surest proof of their illusory nature, their outward ferocity mirroring the inward force unconsciously used to bring to heel their own deepest, most subversive desires. The result is a kind of desperate secular materialism. The danger is that the violence of the individual repression rebounds outward; anger seeps out through the pores of culture, emerging in the masochism of Western media, for example. Our own time seems to be characterized by a multiplicity of micro-narratives that give us the illusion of free choice, (i.e., individualism); but these micro-narratives may just overcode more fundamental narratives of determination, making us surprisingly alike underneath all the fashionable trappings. Multiplicity only obfuscates the harder edges of materialism, upward mobility, capitalism.

Narraticity is subject to cultural shifts of immense proportions. Pre-Eighteenth-Century English subjectivity, for example, was streamlined by a devout, often severe form of Christianity, which provided a rigid context for the individual life, a seemingly concrete surface to beat one's soul against, gaining the hard proof of existence. Yet it offered, in conjunction with practical modes of social function, a spiritual—and emotional—means of self-expression, however homogenized. The economically driven movements at the turn of the century ultimately destroyed the security of this shared world, allowing a newly freed and upwardly mobile middle class to adopt cultural symbols at will from a variety of narrative patterns, adapting them for their own purposes. What freedom of expression this cultural direction provided, however, was offset by an accompanying sense of falseness. The Enlightenment did not simply displace

religious discourse, it drove spiritual sensibility and the subjective world of feeling underground.¹⁰ Moreover, the new potential for a multiplicity of narrative identification produced the private and constant awareness of the arguably fictional nature of these structures, the dangerous feeling that we are all just “playing along.” De- or re-contextualized, the weight of the individual symbol is diminished and truth is always in question. Even today, however, for many people one or several stock forms of cultural narrative suffice—at least for a time—to satisfy their expectations of existence. Many spend their lives attempting exclusively to identify with one particular narrative, effectively repressing any emotional or physical residue and siphoning off the resulting frustration into various outlets provided by their adopted pattern. Thus their internalized Others develop accordingly and keep them tied to particular mode of self-expression. For others, however, these highly restrictive [singular] narratives cannot satisfy our desire to *be*. We ultimately feel the lack, the discrepancy between what we can represent with the narrative discourses available to us, and what we know—beyond language—that we are. Often, it is those aspects of ourselves that don’t fit the existing narrative spectrum, those we are required to repress, which can offer the deepest, most potent and potentially satisfying life. It is the Other, then, in his or her frightening specificity, that proves key to a fuller existence.

It is at this juncture in time and conceptual space that we encounter Mary Wollstonecraft. Living and writing at the end of the Eighteenth Century, she encountered a more restrictive narrative structure than we can imagine today. Not only did religion and class fix the terms of one’s social existence, but gendered narratives placed particular restraints on women, severely limiting the roles available to them. Precluded from public life, women depended entirely on the

¹⁰ Rousseau ultimately tries to re-legitimize the life of feeling by reconstructing the implied reader in his text. Wollstonecraft’s challenge is much greater, as she has additional limitations placed on her gender that she must overcome—this will be the subject of my final section.

financial and social protection of men. Thus, feminine subjectivity was constructed around the desire of a male Other; only in fulfilling these desires—both sexual and domestic in nature—could they ensure social and economic survival and retain any recourse to power. In his sixth and seventh chapters of *Seminar XX*, “God and the Jouissance of Woman, A *Love Letter*,” Lacan argues that women, both socially and psychologically, are placed in the position of Other within the signifying chain, defined only in relation to the active male agent. Similarly, Simone De Beauvoir suggested that women are “trained to see [them]selves as objects[...] positioned as Other.” While women defined themselves in terms of male desire, men defined their desires of women in terms of their relation to other men. Thus modes of competition, domination, and power between men determined how they related to women, rather than a one-to-one relationship with a woman based on mutual recognition. Not only does this make for problematic and painfully inauthentic relationships between genders in which women, playing the objective rather than subjective role and required to repress all surplus desire/being that does not simply perform the desire of the other, always come out on the short end, her subjectivity even within the privacy of her own mind is not only severely limited, but is outside of female control. The female experience of desire is restricted to a desire to *be* desired by a subject; thus, to feel desire is to feel desired and to access desire is to fashion (that is—perform) oneself in relation to the desire of the masculine subject. A woman’s “internalized Other,” then, rather than an imaginary friend constructed of various social models whose sole purpose is to reflect and effectively translate the interior experience of Self in relation to the pressure of the Real, is instead likely to mirror the culturally constructed male subject. Under the pressure of the Real, and the tension of these inner and outer demands, a woman must remake herself into an image which fulfills the projected male desire, suppressing even a private acknowledgement of any desires that lie beyond his horizon of

expectations. The surplus desire that women must suppress, Lacan calls *plus de jouir* or feminine “*jouissance*,” that which paradoxically exists and does not in the world as a projection of lack. Relating this female “lack” to Sixteenth Century female mysticism, he even suggests that female “*plus de jouir*” projected as a fantasy relation to a divine Other is proof of God’s continued existence. Faced with an internal Other that alienates them from rather than acknowledges their interiority, bearing the invisible weight of their surplus desire, women are left with the disconcerting, unspeakable knowledge that they inhabit a purgatorial space, half acknowledged by man, the other half socially unrecognized and, as such, only pseudo-extant. For Mary Wollstonecraft, who never did anything by halves, such an existence was impossible.

My reluctance to engage with the text of *Letters During a Short Residence* before establishing this theoretical framework is in part because I believe Wollstonecraft and the events that inspired the book to be vastly misunderstood. Let this stand as a Vindication of the Vindicator. While no one denies Wollstonecraft’s intellectual genius, it is a question of what biographers and critics have made of her pain. It is not simply the effects of thwarted desire for a marital partner that Wollstonecraft suffers from; indeed Ty’s examination of Wollstonecraft’s version of Imlay as a manifestation of the traits she seeks in the ideal partner falls far short of comprehending the implications of the text. In other words, we have failed to comprehend the deeply determinative nature of desire. Let us revise our image of an emotionally damaged, abandoned woman “wailing for her demon lover” and rather understand her personal pain as the sublime searing of nonbeing, of living in a world in which she could not fully exist. The customary female role, with its lack of agency and its limited and limiting emotional range, did not satisfy Wollstonecraft; she saw too clearly the discrepancy between her potential as a full person and the social identity accessible to her. In the context of our intrasubjective model of

narraticity, Wollstonecraft's obsessive desire for specific individuals reveals her instinctual recognition of and capitalization on the relational nature of identity. By seeking out key individuals—presumably those with unique capabilities which allowed them to transgress the limits dictated by society—and transferring her internal ideal Other onto them, Wollstonecraft brought to life the transgressive Imaginary Friend which secured her internal existence. We can trace this increasingly sophisticated process from a passionate dedication to a diffuse and naïve sense of God as a child, to her adolescent infatuation with the shallow and sophisticated Jane Arden, to the kindred friendship with Fannie Blood as a young adult. In her twenties, having secured her friendship with Fannie and still feeling unfulfilled, perhaps because of a developing sense of her own sexuality as much as the cultural necessity of masculine recognition, Wollstonecraft's desire was transferred onto a series of suitors, beginning with “Cambridge don”¹¹ Joshua Waterhouse, schoolteacher John Hewlett, followed by the moody, unavailable Henri Fuseli, and finally the, the infamous Gilbert Imlay. It was through these relationships that Wollstonecraft attempted to dictate the terms of her own existence. In thus collapsing the personal and political, she exhibits an undeniable consistency between her private struggles and her public campaign to redefine feminine subjectivity.

Wollstonecraft was not the first woman to attempt to use a Self/Other dialectic designed to restrict feminine subjectivity as the very means of liberation. It was Godwin who first linked Wollstonecraft to Goethe, comparing her letters to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, believing they demonstrated the same timbre of genius, that perfect fusion of emotion and intellect, ultimately making the decision to publish the original letters—and sacrifice her good name—in order to preserve them for future generations. Considering Goethe wrote *Sorrows* in response to

¹¹ Jane Moore. *Mary Wollstonecraft* (14)

his own heartbreak, perhaps saving himself from the fate of Werther by creating him, the biography of the authors certainly line up, as do the subject-matter, the epistolary genre, and emotional brilliance of the texts. It is Goethe's Beautiful Soul, however, who I believe to be most closely related to our author. Modeled on the autobiography of Joanna Von Klettenburg, Goethe's Book Six, *Confessions of a Beautiful Soul*, offers a sudden departure from his exploration of masculine identity in his Bildungsroman, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Disputed over the years as an extraneous addition to the text, *Confessions* is essential to Goethe's vision of narrativity, simultaneously offering a critique on the masculine Bildungsroman and the text itself, as well as a potential model for a Feminine Bildung. We are introduced to the Beautiful Soul (a fictionalized Von-Klettenburg), who has fallen passionately in love with a man named Narcissus. Upon realizing, however, that Narcissus only recognizes her insofar as she is a manifestation of his desires, her only purpose to serve as a reflecting pool for his self-image in the shallowest possible sense, her love quickly dissipates. Seeking a mutual relationship that allows her to express the entire range and depth of her soul, she finds the penultimate Imaginary Friend in Jesus.¹² With her inner certainty of Jesus' full recognition of her, she gains the ability to merge her private identity with her public narrative, transcending social restrictions placed on feminine subjectivity.

The Beautiful Soul, both the living woman and her fictional doppelganger, bear witness to historical efforts to redefine feminine subjectivity through religious insurgency. A number of spiritual sects formed in the Seventeenth Century, which sought to reinterpret Christianity, all redefined gender roles within their communities, often balancing the power relation between men and women, acknowledging various forms of feminine mysticism, and redefining traditional

¹² Von Klettenburg's notion of Jesus was considered a radical one by mainstream Christianity.

notions of sexuality that disempowered women. Existing on the periphery of society and requiring renunciation of mainstream culture, these religious groups did not offer the majority of women a viable means of narrative identification. Goethe's *Beautiful Soul* marks the individuation of this radical spirituality, made possible by an increasingly secular, upwardly mobile society in which the growing possibility of self-determination was slowly supplanting fate.

Wollstonecraft joins this radical movement, but despite her early devotion to Christianity she replaces the insurrectionary spiritual relationship with more corporeal connections, seeking the divine—quite literally—in man. This can perhaps be attributed to her commitment to the intellectual and aesthetic ideologies of her time, from Enlightenment to Romanticism, as well as her desire to participate in society rather than remove herself from it. It was because of this inherent preference for community and the “polished circles of the world,” that her thirst for personal freedom was necessarily transmuted into a crusade for the benefit of all women. Her task, then, through sheer force of will, was to redefine feminine subjectivity by restructuring society from the inside out. In seeking out real-life individuals and attempting to construct a Self/Other dialectic that recognizes and therefore legitimizes her private sense of identity—thus acknowledging a re-conceptualized, potentially boundless feminine subjectivity—one that would enable her to participate in society on her own terms, Wollstonecraft has externalized, secularized, and sexualized the sacred yet insurrectionary relation between the *Beautiful Soul* and her imaginary friend.

There exists a tragic flaw in these women's attempts to re-conceptualize feminine identity through their relation to a carefully constructed Other. Despite the radical purpose of this calculated dialectic, it is nevertheless a relation located within—and modeled after—the very

system it critiques, and is therefore subject to and hampered by its limitations. Each Christian sect necessarily defines itself in relation to the original religion; Wollstonecraft's chosen Other is unmistakably masculine, supporting existing gendered power relations, and the Beautiful Soul draws on her contemporary religious and gender narratives, gaining power from her departure from them while simultaneously reinforcing their authority. Wollstonecraft's chosen relationship possesses an even more serious fault line: her chosen Other is not Jesus and he is not imaginary. In transferring her internal ideal Other onto Gilbert Imlay, she gives the power of a god to a man. She has handed him sole proprietorship of her soul and given him the authority to make final pronouncement on her fate. Without him, she does not exist. As a Beautiful Soul and an intangible figure, Jesus is not nearly so problematic; Natalia and Joanna Von Klettenburg can benefit from the recognition of their internalized Imaginary Friend, without exposing themselves to unexpected censure or rejection—their existence remains firmly within their control.¹³ In linking one's existence with the recognition of a living individual, Wollstonecraft renders herself vulnerable to the possibility that the individual's expectations and desires differ from her own projected ones. By all accounts Imlay was a chameleon. He possessed a compulsive need to be admired, an uncanny ability to read people, and a treacherous combination of essential selfishness, complicated shallowness, and sociopathic charm: he was the human equivalent of a puddle, whose vivid reflections give the erroneous appearance of depth. A charismatic master of surfaces, he perceived Wollstonecraft's projections and effectively reflected them as long as the relationship served his purposes. Yet for Wollstonecraft, who's investment ran deeper, a single miscalculation—believing Imlay to be the manifestation of an ideal Other rather than a fraud

¹³ But it does lead to increasing isolation.

motivated by hidden agendas that had grown out of the very same sexist ideologies she sought to escape—had disastrous consequences.

CHAPTER 3
INTO THE WASTELAND OR
TO BE OR NOT TO BE: SUICIDAL LONGINGS AND TRAUMATIC LANDSCAPES

When Wollstonecraft sets out for Norway, she is godless. It has been three days since she discovered Imlay living with an actress in London, three days since her first attempt at suicide; only four months later she will throw herself into the Thames, lungs saturating, heart giving over to the icy water. In her first assay for oblivion, it was Imlay who prevented the lethal dose of laudanum from reaching her lips, and it was he who came up with the idea of her journey north, simultaneously removing an impediment to his amorous pursuits and gaining a proxy to oversee the investigation into and location of one of his ships, stolen by Norwegian pirates, purportedly filled with bootlegged silver. The discovery of the ship or the equivalent reparations would have made Imlay a very wealthy man. She carried with her a letter of introduction, written by him, that named her his best friend and wife. Wollstonecraft's motivations for travelling northward with a nine month old child, a nursemaid, and a broken heart into what she called the "bastille of nature" prove more complex. For her, life had ended. Upon Imlay's request, she entrusted her suicide letter to him to burn,¹ leaving along with it a note which said: "a strong conviction seems to whirl round in the very centre of my brain, which, like the fiat of fate, emphatically assures me, that grief has a firm hold of my heart" (Collected Letters, 294). In her first letter to him from the road she continues: "I will not distress you by talking...of the struggle I had to keep alive my dying heart...dear Imlay,—am I always to be tossed about thus?—shall I never find an asylum to rest *contented* in...Why do you not attach those tender emotions round the idea of home, which even now dim my eyes?—This alone is affection—everything else is only humanity, electrified

¹ From her note, it seems he requested the letter, perhaps because it implicated him and he wished to ensure history would not remember him as Wollstonecraft's murderer.

by sympathy” (Collected Letters, 295). Estranged from her own vision of home, one which included a version of Imlay that had suddenly ceased to exist, she set off into a void between two deaths. With her subtle sense of living metaphor, perhaps she sought a wilderness to match her own desperate wildness, sudden and strange. Perhaps she felt her choice was movement or death. The myriad shades of living memory and the uncompromising lyric morality, private property of Wollstonecraft, which no doubt spurred her on are inaccessible to us except through her writing. Her original letters written from the road—twenty-six letters filled with an absolute pain—reflect a woman at war with herself, “struggling with her dying heart”; they contain a cutting grief that reaches across time and a poetic brilliance that makes one wish for a variation on the world in which she had taken to writing sonnets. They are uncontrolled, passionate, and honest. She wrote them daily, compulsively, long epistles which translated and documented her every emotion. The pen was her lifeline, tying her to Imlay and ultimately to herself—as long as she could articulate her tortuous interior topography to her projected Other, she existed. These letters staved off suicide. How they functioned thus warrants closer inspection and necessarily must be understood within the terms of intrasubjectivity discussed in the previous section. These letters offer evidence of at least two specific and seemingly paradoxical motivations: in wandering north, she attempts both to resuscitate her god and to transcend him, both to gain his recognition and to re-conceptualize her notion of Other, relocating it within the scope of her control, thereby preserving her existence.

That Wollstonecraft travelled to Scandinavia with the hope of reviving her relationship to Imlay is clear. For one who preferred the “polished circles of the world” (90) her sudden Romantic—and passionate—interest in wild landscapes might be partly attributed to a shared imaginary the two seem to have constructed in the early stages of their relationship, when they

dreamt of settling together in the American west. Setting off into the wild, Wollstonecraft may very well have been identifying herself in relation to an earlier version of Imlay as Other, one ideally fit to the pioneering life both had envisioned. Even the eventual choice of her published travelogue's genre—letters to an American lover describing the northern wilderness—mirrored the template Imlay used for his book, *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America*, published during the first months of their relationship, a series of letters describing the American wilderness to a friend in England.² Imlay also appears to have presented his pecuniary pursuits as an attempt to gain the capital necessary for establishing their mutual dream. Yet by the time Wollstonecraft sets out for Norway, she is aware that his monetary interests are, rather than a means to an end, the end in themselves. Having already criticized his “commercial face”³ in her letters from Paris, she wrote that his “pleasures in money, drinking and women” wouldn't last more than a handful of years, and that “in the solitude of declining life, I will be remembered with regret—I was going to say remorse but checked my pen” (CL, 283). Letters throughout her Scandinavian travels further testify to her dawning recognition of his moral insipidity, his bankruptcy of character, and superficiality bordering on sociopathy. She writes: “Our minds are not congenial. I have lived in an ideal world, and fostered sentiments that you do not comprehend—or you would not treat me thus” (CL, 319); and later, “Should your sensibility ever awake, remorse will find its way to your heart; and, in the midst of business and sensual pleasure, I shall appear before you, the victim of your deviation from rectitude” (CL,

² While some even attribute partial authorship to Wollstonecraft considering the revolutionary treatment of women and faultless morality in the text, it is generally accepted that Imlay was the sole author. That Wollstonecraft had input in, or inspired the content, considering it was written and published during their courtship, is likely, however.

³ She asks him instead to bring back his “barrier face” to his “barrier girl” referencing the location of their first romantic encounters, one of the Barriers—or toll bridges—of Paris. She both accuses him of being “two-faced” here and suggests that the capitalistic version of him is false.

327). Still later she writes: “You will not always forget me.—You will feel something like remorse, for having lived only for yourself—and sacrificed my peace to inferior gratifications. In a comfortless old age, you will remember you had one disinterested friend, whose heart you wounded to the quick. The hour of recollection will come—and you will not be satisfied to act the part of a boy, till you fall into that of a dotard” (CL, 334). These cutting remarks reveal Wollstonecraft’s assessment of Imlay’s business enterprises.⁴ For one who declares that “principles are sacred things” (CL, 334), it seems incomprehensible that in light of these observations and remonstrations she should set out on a capitalistic venture on his behalf, one that she detested. Yet she did. If successful, she would have been the source of his wealth, the deliverer of his dreams. One can imagine her endeavoring to believe that, with his monetary thirsts sated, Imlay would leave off his frenzied pursuit of novelty and freely return to higher thoughts, ultimately recognizing that the impotent passing crackle of lust is trumped by the returns of real love. That Wollstonecraft literally stakes her life on the possibility of reviving an earlier version of Imlay speaks to the critical role he had come to play in her existence, one best understood within the model of intrasubjectivity we established in the first section. Imlay served as the externalized form of her internal ideal Other; having commended her soul to him, it was only natural that the survival of her body would similarly be linked to him. Wollstonecraft’s identity—her very existence—hinged upon *his* recognition of her in lieu of society’s; yet here he was, aligning himself with the very ideologies she was engaging him to counteract.

Ironically, Wollstonecraft’s struggle to resuscitate this God-Other in order to save herself entailed a significant break from him. She left him to his amorous pursuits, and travelled into the wilds alone with her daughter. To do this, I contest that she had to have another, deeper motive.

⁴ More will be said of this in the final section; she perceives here the link between capitalism and sexist ideologies.

Barely recovered from a suicide attempt, ruminating obsessively on death, even documenting the impulse to throw herself and her child off of Scandinavian cliffs (CL), we might identify Freud's "death drive" as the underlying impetus for her journey: perhaps she sought nothing more than a magnificent end. Yet, as Thanatos is diametrically opposed—and thus irrevocably tied to—Eros, we might with equal impunity recognize it as a move toward life, an involuntary instinct activated in the name of survival and self-preservation. Scattered among the suicidal references in her letters to Imlay during this time are lines that undeniably thrum with active purpose and clear vision, bearing witness to a mind struggling to resurface. Refusing to accept his monetary support, both before and after her journey, she stated: "I have two or three plans in my head to earn our subsistence; for do not suppose that, neglected by you, I will lie under obligations of a pecuniary kind to you! – No; I would sooner submit to menial service. I wanted the support of your affection – that gone, all is over" (CL, 281). She wrote these lines in Paris while gravely ill, just after she received a letter from him containing the first signs of his betrayal; making plans for her financial survival in the midst of her pain indicates that she certainly would have seen the potential for a business venture of her own in the trip to Norway, one which might allow her to throw off at least one tie to Imlay. Having read the travelogues of her day,⁵ she knew it as a popular genre and understood that as a female traveler to a wild land few men—and certainly no English women—had ever seen, she possessed a unique and marketable perspective; even while contemplating suicide on cliff sides, she kept meticulous notes on the flora and fauna, the landscape and culture of Scandinavia. Moreover, if we recognize that she travels to reinforce a specific sense of subjectivity in relation to Imlay as her ideal, internalized Other, then we must acknowledge that she ultimately travels for herself. She constructs a life and character that she—

⁵ She had, in fact, "reviewed more than a dozen travel books...from 1788-97 for the Analytical Review" (Ty, 83)

through her internalized Other—can perceive as embodying the full subject she feels herself to be. She is the kind of human that travels alone, capable of the deepest love and sharpest grief, able to survive emotional and physical hardships that cripple her. Her journey, then, was her attempt to repair a failed system of identification and, barring success, separate her internalized Other from the fallible Imlay in order to save herself.

While Wollstonecraft's underlying motivation—survival—was uniform, the two forms of its manifestation produce an inevitable conflict, and a tension responsible for the controlled yet schizophrenic feel of her letters, as she ranges from humorous observations, to brilliant philosophizing, to poetic ruminations on memory, to powerful critiques of Imlay's behavior and character. The reason for this seeming inconsistency is simple: she oscillates between addressing her letters to an internal ideal version of Imlay and the real-life man, expressing the range and depth of her subjectivity to the former, and attempting to break through the limitations, open up the mind, and reset the moral compass of the latter. Her words admonish and reprimand him as she laments his lack of imagination, his inability to transcend the shallow attractions to social and bodily surfaces to recognize moral beauty and the deeper desires it awakens. One rather philistine critic said of her remonstrations: "She would have done better to play coy, instead of hounding him with letters." While such a statement indicates a gross misapprehension of the situation, due perhaps to a superficial identification with the masculine, more importantly, it indicates two points crucial to my argument. First, it illustrates how the boundaries of feminine subjectivity are built directly into language, which automatically situates the masculine as subject. Each word collects associations over time which reflect the society that produces them: *hounding*, with its derogatory canine connotations, its sense of uncontrolled violence, and its history of being used to describe female behavior that displeases, paints a disrespectful and

inaccurate portrait of Wollstonecraft. Indeed, it is a pack mentality characterization. To play *coy*—something only women are culturally characterized as doing—is to be both manipulative and sexually objectified. Today, popular psychology refers to the inflammatory and false use of language to control and disempower people, particularly women, as “gaslighting.” That the letters which express grief in direct terms and illuminate the innerworkings of a brilliant mind can be so dismissed and derided, speaks to the extent to which limited notions of feminine subjectivity persist even today.

Second, this critic has blundered upon further evidence that Wollstonecraft’s relation to Imlay embodied the Self/Other dialectic which allowed her to determine her own subjectivity. Her refusal to “play coy” and manipulate him by performing to the projected masculine desire is profoundly significant. She did not situate herself as an object in relation to the masculine subject, but rather criticizes Imlay for not fulfilling her projected desires and not recognizing—and valuing—her full subjectivity. If he prefers someone who is willing to play the role of a feminine object, then his love and valuation are worthless to her; she seeks in him one who is capable of authentically recognizing and loving her full subjectivity. Every word she writes both names the Other she believes Imlay to be, and asks that Other to bear witness to her existence. To admit he was not what he at first seemed was to acknowledge, in relational terms, she did not exist.⁶ Her letters, then, are an exercise in existence.

Any interpretation of Wollstonecraft’s visionary project, the published work *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, requires us first to understand the traumatic events which produced it. On the surface, the story of Wollstonecraft relationship with Gilbert Imlay appears

⁶ She will ultimately recognize that it is, in fact, an internal problem, and it is precisely her recognition of Imlay’s lack—and engaging a projected readership’s recognition of it—that she can establish her full subjectivity.

to be a straightforward case of love and betrayal; and yet I believe that beneath the narrative arc exists a second shadow-narrative, undeniably linked to the real events yet unfolding deep in the recesses of the psyche of a brilliant mind. To fully comprehend a vision which linked the personal and political, which saw the individual emotional reality as simultaneously produced by and part of what produces the overarching socio-political structure, necessitates a familiarity with Wollstonecraft's most private struggles, of which her journey to Scandinavia was the zenith. Her original letters are the most accurate representation we have of the state of her mind at the time, and through them we see a woman not passively broken by the betrayal of a lover, but insisting that the ex-lover must enlarge his understanding to recognize—and endeavor to—deserve her. Were she a lesser genius, this might perhaps seem merely to be evidence of egotism.⁷ Yet I believe Lacan's model of intrasubjectivity offers the key to deciphering the implications behind this shadow-narrative at the heart of Wollstonecraft's journey to Scandinavia and the flashes of it we see in her letters, indeed it offers a model that we can perhaps extend more generally to the most intense of social relationships. If Wollstonecraft has linked her internal ideal Other, that manifestation of an inversion of her own *felt* identity designed to recognize her full subjectivity, if she has linked this Other with Imlay, a living man, and if this individual is not capable of recognizing the nuances of the subject, then her system must necessarily fail, and fail spectacularly. Wollstonecraft's attempts to resuscitate her God-Other and to transcend him throughout her travels and in her letters, like the insurrectionary religious relationships of her forerunners, ultimately fails because her chosen model functions within the very system it attempts to destroy.

⁷ It is the goal of this work to demonstrate how Wollstonecraft ultimately utilizes this highly personal act to revolutionize the world and free the feminine subject.

When Wollstonecraft arrived in Germany at the end of her travels, she learned that Imlay had no intention of meeting her, as he had promised. Back in London she learns from her cook that he was now living with the actress. A letter followed, harried and painful, which began, “I write you now on my knees...I shall make no comments on your conduct; or any appeal to the world. Let my wrongs sleep with me! Soon, very soon shall I be at peace. When you receive this, my burning head will be cold” (CL, 326). This appeal to the world will later be the link fastening her to life, but at the moment she wrote those words she intended an immediate cessation of her existence. She closed with a curse: “God bless you! May you never know by experience what you have made me endure. Should your sensibility ever awake, remorse will find its way to your heart; and, in the midst of business and sensual pleasure, I shall appeal before you, the victim of your deviation from rectitude (CL, 327). To Wollstonecraft, sensibility, a felt-morality, is what raised the level of humanity above its animal instincts. Sensibility on the individual scale was what created a beautiful life, and on the large scale formed the foundation of her Utopian visions of society. The closest approximation we have today is something we might call empathy, yet it lacks the intricate ties of conscience to memory, and seems a weaker version of Wollstonecraft’s concept. Even possessed by a suicidal depression, Wollstonecraft constructs a complex scenario representative of the intrasubjective relation we have attempted to define. Only now, she envisions herself the imaginary being; her spectre can only haunt him if he can see her, and he can only perceive her if he acquires the very same capability of recognition which would have prevented his betrayal of her.

Shortly after writing this letter, she walks to the Thames, visiting two different bridges until she finds one free of any passersby who might be tempted to save her; there she throws herself into the icy water. Her reason for this decided bid for death was simple. Her internal

Other was still firmly linked to the real Imlay; his rejection—his refusal to recognize and value her—simultaneously destroyed her conception of her social identity in the world and, based on our model of intrasubjectivity, effectively terminated her interior recognition of her own existence. That Wollstonecraft’s decision to end her life arose out of much deeper existential concerns than a failed love relationship⁸ and that her personal journey, letters, and suicide attempts are irrevocably tied to her political vision, becomes especially clear when we look at her last letters to Imlay. Having been rescued from the Thames—against her will—by fishermen after she lost consciousness, she set about the work of breaking her internal Other free from Imlay: “I know that your mind, your heart, and your principles of action, are all superior to your present conduct” she wrote, “You know best whether I am still preserving the remembrance of an *imaginary being*.—I once thought that I knew you thoroughly—but now I am obliged to leave some doubts that involuntarily press on me, to be cleared up by time” [*my ital*] (CL, 334).

Wollstonecraft had begun to recognize that the version of Imlay by whom she identified herself was, in effect, an invisible friend, an imaginary being—a manifestation of her need to exist in a society that denied her full subjectivity. Unlike the Beautiful Soul’s conception of Jesus, Imlay was only a human being, one not strong or imaginative enough to see beyond the horizon of a limited society, to do anything but operate within and perpetuate its restrictive structure. Yet even while she begins to consider the possibility that Imlay is not who she believed and hoped that he was, she cannot let go of the prospect of a real manifestation of her Other. She not only wanted to live for herself, but to live in the world. Her final words to him reverberate with possibility, they petition the world for the existence of a being capable of transcending the time and recognizing Wollstonecraft not as Eighteenth-Century Woman, but as human:

⁸ Or perhaps that love relationships are bound up with processes of identification in the deepest of ways

I now solemnly assure you, that this is an eternal farewell. – Yet I flinch not from the duties which tie me to life.

That there is ‘sophistry’ on one side or other is certain; but now it matters not on which. On my part it has not been a question of words. Yet your understanding or mine must be strangely warped—or what you term ‘delicacy,’ appears to me to be exactly the contrary. I have no criterion for morality, and have thought in vain, if the sensations which lead you to follow an angle or a step, be the sacred foundation of principles and affection. Mine has been of a very different nature, or it would not have stood the brunt of your sarcasms.

The sentiment in me is still sacred. If there be any part of me that will survive the sense of my misfortunes, it is the purity of my affections. The impetuosity of your senses, may have led you to term mere animal desire, the source of principle; and it may give zest to some years to come. – Whether you will always think so, I shall never know.

It is strange that, in spite of all you do, something like conviction forces me to believe, that you are not what you appear to be.

I part with you in peace.

I still believe you are not what you seem. (CL, 339)

Her final words name the fallacy she struggles with, they identify Imlay as separate from her internal Other, as one incapable of the moral beauty and sensibility that she believes is of greatest value in the world and that she seeks to be recognized for. Yet her final words, “I still believe you are not what you seem,” resound in the silence. It is as if she is reaching beyond Imlay, to humanity in general. For Wollstonecraft, whose words were never empty, this marked the complete cessation of communication directly with Imlay and the beginning of *Letters Written During a Short Residence*. Having asked for her personal letters back from Imlay, she set about rewriting them into a travelogue she intended to publish; one meant for a broad audience yet, tellingly, addressed to an unidentified “you.” Taken in the context of these final words, one can only assume she wrote the published work in the same vein as the original letters—both to appeal to Imlay and, failing that, to transcend him. Yet I believe it was no longer about Imlay the man. Instead, I believe that conviction in her which refuses to let go, is instead holding on to the

“imaginary being” she had begun to acknowledge, that what she ultimately needed to believe in was the possibility of an individual(s) in the world capable of breaking through society’s narrow scope of experiencing feminine subjectivity, one capable of recognizing her full range of being. After all, it is only by conceiving of an Other to perceive the nuances of ourselves, that we may believe in our existence.

CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION

A (Re)Visionary Autobiography

These original letters and the traumatic events that inspired them set the stage for our reading of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written During a Short Residence*. The socio-political backdrop against which they unfolded offers further insights: writing on the cusp of a new century, Wollstonecraft clearly embodied the broader cultural transition between an Enlightenment consciousness and Romanticism, visibly struggling with the tension between reason and emotion, between an old classed hierarchy and a new more flexible social system based on the accumulation of wealth. The new focus on rational inquiry established the possibility for individuals to think about themselves outside of religious doctrine, but it also undermined the religious-based modes of self-expression to give life meaning without offering viable alternatives for acknowledging interiority. In works like *Vindication* Wollstonecraft adheres to pure—if passionate—logic, establishing her reputation within Enlightenment discourse; in *Letters Written During a Short Residence* she delves into the emotional world sublimated in her earlier public writings; “I reasoned and reasoned but my heart was too full” (109), she writes, insisting that such emotion has both a place in the public sphere and a powerful potential for social reform. In doing so, she counters the Enlightenment belief that “truth” be attained solely through scientific measurement, logic, and detached observation, the resulting data creating a topographical chart which delineated the parameters of the “real” world. In writing her travelogue Wollstonecraft provides the details befitting such a chart, yet she layers into her reading of the landscape a new dimension, expressing, through her observations of the phenomenal world, the underlying shadow forms of the intangible but equally extant psychic interiority. If Enlightenment discourse has driven the emotional experience underground, in

Wollstonecraft it becomes recoded elsewhere, in the landscape, in architecture, subtly resurfacing in various places, like a symptom of a repressed neurosis.

The problem of representing the full range of life experience within the parameters of Enlightenment discourse is further complicated by the rise of capitalism. The Industrial Revolution with its creation of new forms of inequality and class distinction, with its exploitation of a new working class and its idealization of upward mobility reduced man's social value, discrediting his cultural heritage, and valuing his actions only in terms of economic status. The result was a crisis not only of reason versus emotion, but one of social identity and value. One could now pose the question: Who am I to others? What role am I to play in the world? For what do my talents and personality suit me? But the new capitalist criteria on which these questions pivoted, while allowing for the possibility of upward mobility, were in themselves reductive, tying individual worth exclusively to abstract economic value. Pre-destination gave way to a sudden and breathtaking array of possibilities, but these possibilities were usually linked to the values of the market place. In the middle class people were defined by what they did, and what value they could be exploited for. Within the capitalist framework, the middle class had few models to follow for establishing individual identity other than ones based on the accumulation of wealth.

The literary sector began to address these questions with genres like the bildungsroman and the autobiography. As a forerunner of Romanticism, Rousseau was one of the first to carve a public niche for his own direct expression of interiority, (“regarding my feelings,” he says, “I can never be wrong”) utilizing a secularized version of the Christian confession in his autobiographical work, *Confessions*, to express his emotional life. Equal parts critic and admirer of Rousseau—Wollstonecraft remarks to Imlay, honestly though certainly with inflammatory

intent, that “I have always been half in love with him [Rousseau]” (CL, 263)—Wollstonecraft designs her own autobiographical, confessional work using this model. Both writers exchange the ear of the priest for that of the reader, and in doing so they declare the right of final judgment as belonging to man and not God, assuring the public domain a firm grip on identity construction. These works recognize the importance of the interior emotional life of the individual in determining their public role, answering the question *what will I do* with a statement of *who I am*. Yet there are fundamental differences between Wollstonecraft’s project and Rousseau’s. As Stephen Spender says, Rousseau was addressing the “spirit of democracy,” seeking in his readers the absolution presumably denied him by God. As Spender states, there is something suspect about Rousseau’s strategy since he seems to be attempting to “justify [himself] in eyes of the world by bringing the reader down to his moral level” in order to obtain their empathy and approval, and that there is a “lie concealed in his very method, since to justify oneself by degrading the reader is dishonest.”¹ It appears that Rousseau is intent on gaining entry into the gates of heaven by popular vote.

When Wollstonecraft began *Letters*, however, it was not absolution she sought, but recognition. Undoubtedly Wollstonecraft modeled her travelogue on works like *The Confessions*, by men who literally wrote their own life narratives into existence, utilizing the written word as a means of self-determination. Yet, as a woman living in a society that objectified women, limiting them to secondary, supportive roles primarily determined by male desire, the act of writing one’s own narrative is not only a novel concept, it is a positively revolutionary one. Like Rousseau she establishes her chosen individual narrative identity within a pre-existing social context, gaining her reader’s empathy and approval, yet while Rousseau’s right to determine his own life story is

¹ Stephen Spender’s “Confessions and Autobiography” (1980)

unquestioned, Wollstonecraft must establish a narrative of feminine subjectivity within a social context that precludes it. Rather than dragging down the reader to her moral level as Rousseau does, she creates the conditions of her own existence by lifting the reader up to her moral expectations. More than Rousseau, Wollstonecraft really is addressing the “Spirit of Democracy”; to become Mary Wollstonecraft she must therefore revolutionize the world one reader at time.

Before she can effectively use the travel narrative to escape gender oppression, however, she must first explore the inner topography that reproduces this oppression psychologically. If we look at Wollstonecraft’s relationship to Gilbert Imlay, her journey to Norway, and her original letters as a failed attempt to repair the externalized intrasubjective relation with the masculine which she presumably needed to fully exist in the world, we must view her choice to remain tied to life, to continue to believe in the possibility of an extant ideal Other despite all evidence to the contrary, and to write her travelogue as proof of her belief in the authenticity of her own subjectivity. In choosing to rewrite her original letters, redirecting them from Imlay to a reader that transcended him, she recognized not only his inadequacy, but that of her failed system of identification with a specific masculine Other, an internalization of that very same social subjugation which she fought against. By reconstructing her subjectivity for a projected non-gendered, progressive readership—one of her own creation—she reestablishes control over her identity, rising to meet her own moral expectations, and ultimately reconstructing her interior intrasubjective identity through this external relation. In other words, by creating her character in *Letters* she is able to resuscitate the woman she felt herself to be and wanted to become in the world, salvaging the subjectivity victimized by external forms of social repression (as embodied by Imlay) and its internalized manifestations. Wollstonecraft re-writes her letters to free herself,

to survive, but her re-*vision* does not stop there; instead her quest for personal freedom is the cornerstone to a potentially much greater social revolution. The personal relationship which Wollstonecraft fosters between her narrative subject in *Letters* and her predicted readership ultimately serves as the means by which she enacts social change, by lifting the reader to a higher moral ground.

She had no easy task. The public's moral condition, generally considered property of priests and lawmakers whose reformatory success corresponded with their level of eloquence, was Wollstonecraft's target. Rather than joining the ranks of the pious preaching moral reform, she employed an approach exponentially more effective: seduction. As Godwin posited, Wollstonecraft indeed wrote a narrative carefully calculated to make her reader "fall in love with her." The published travelogue contains letters addressed to, as Buss calls it, an "unnamed you," the mysterious lover who, the reader comes to understand through hints in the letters, has betrayed the narrator and is presumably threatening to desert her and their daughter. The published letters, like their origin, are addressed to this "you"—presumably Imlay—allowing her to use the familiar, trusting, and loving tone one does with a lover, but the difference is that the published version is crafted for a third party: the reader. Wollstonecraft carefully draws readers into the private world she constructs in the intimate shared emotional space with her lover: where she originally crafted her stories for Imlay's recognition, she now extends these to the reader. She creates her narrator's (presumed by the reader to be Wollstonecraft herself) subjectivity for the recognition of her new transcendent Other. The reader aligns her/himself with the beauty of Wollstonecraft and against the decrepitude of the "unnamed you," Imlay, who has proven himself unworthy in his failure to comprehend—and love—the narrator. The reader does in fact

act as “a sympathetic surrogate to Imlay,”² but only insofar as Imlay represented a greater social problem Wollstonecraft seeks to rally her readers against.

The link between Wollstonecraft’s personal seduction of the reader and her social revolution can be understood if we return to Lacan’s model of intrasubjective identity and his notion *L’ame Ame L’ame*, or Soul souls for Soul. If we understand the traditional conception of soul, especially within the context of the sixteenth-century female mystics the narrative of the Beautiful Soul was modeled on, as that infinite, boundless, and inexpressible interiority we *feel* to exist, then the act of falling in love is entering into a relation that meets—or surpasses—our internal intrasubjective relation. We recognize one who recognizes that which manifests in the negative space created by our intricate structures of symbols, discerns in the slow burn of language the contours of our subterranean world. Through this mutual recognition, this sublime relation, this flash lightening, the private conception of one’s own interior space—and that of the Other—is, newly illuminated, expanded to the infinite. In seeking to construct a love relationship with her reader, Wollstonecraft writes for one who she believes has the capacity to read between the lines, someone with a soul to match her own, capable of travelling with her into an interior topography—*Travels* is the portrait of a soul souling for soul. Wollstonecraft’s project cannot be limited to the traditional, sexist categories of seduction based on the desire of the male subject for the female body as object, which Lacan links to the female performance of the “*petit objet a*” as an object of masculine desire. Instead, she constructs a relationship with the reader which requires them to recognize her full subjectivity—one unbounded by the restrictions of traditional femininity—reassigning her value expressly in terms of “moral beauty,” articulated by a kind of thinking-feeling which Wollstonecraft has mastered, a perfect balance of reason and emotion. In

² Not, as Pollock suggests, due to her “need to elicit love and/or money from her readers.”

creating her character in *Letters*, Wollstonecraft forms a narrative pattern that answers the crisis of her age, one which readers instinctively gravitate toward as an expression of their own private yearning. This love relationship, once established, is necessarily mutual: Wollstonecraft effectively inhabits the reader's projected Other in his/her own mind; by the end of the narrative, the reader, in recognizing Mary Wollstonecraft, strives to be worthy of her. Thus, shaping her subjectivity on the page, Wollstonecraft creates an intrasubjective mirror for the reader, who finds—reflected back to them—their own lack, which, through Wollstonecraft's careful literary maneuvering to induce pleasure more than pain, feels like potential. It is through this calculated seduction of the reader and the successive love relationship, that Wollstonecraft sparks a private revolution in the heart of the individual, illuminating their own unsounded interior and ultimately redefining their relation to the feminine subject.

If we are to understand Wollstonecraft's travelogue as a (re)visionary autobiography crafted to enact social change as much as to save herself, we therefore *must* acknowledge Wollstonecraft's uncanny ability to conceptually collapse the personal and the political. The traumatic events that dominated her life were, in her mind, a manifestation of a larger social problem. Near the end of *Letters*, Wollstonecraft remarks to Imlay of her feminist focus, "Still harping on the same subject, you will exclaim—How can I avoid it, when most of the struggles of an eventful life have been occasioned by the oppressed state of my sex: we reason deeply, when we forcibly feel" (160). In true Wollstonecraft fashion, she layers and links a series of critiques in this single statement, razing Enlightenment's careful separation of intellect and emotion, noting Imlay's use of 'harping' as a function of a language of subjugation³ which indicates deeper ideological biases, and reveals that the extreme limitations placed on the

³ Wollstonecraft's critique of the language of subjugation will be further discussed in the final section of this paper

feminine subject by society are her primary political concerns because of a lifelong struggle with their repercussions. Despite being “the little hero of each tale” (5) (her apology for which in her *Preface* is more calculated than self-effacing), *Letters* is as much a social critique as an individual one. “All the world is a stage,” she writes, echoing Shakespeare, “and few are there in it who do not play the part they have learnt by rote; and those who do not, seem marks set up to be pelted by fortune; or rather as sign-posts, which point out the road to others, whilst forced to stand still themselves amidst the mud and dust” (180). In consciously constructing her character in *Letters* as a one such “sign-post” she acknowledges the performative nature of narrative identity, its contingency on social context—an audience, or Other—and suggests that her own struggle to create a narrative in *Letters* that transcends those limitations serves a larger purpose. It is a testament to Wollstonecraft’s fortitude and brilliance, to an expansive, seemingly horizonless imagination, that at the zenith of her pain she is able to perceive the intricate cogwork that makes it sound, and visualize, with raw precision, the invisible cultural bulwark that constructs her prison walls. To perceive it, and to carefully calculate what it takes—not to escape—but to tear down the prison itself.

Letters reveals a vision that reverberates from the micro to the macro scales, from the single transitory moment in the life of an individual to the grand concerns of Empire. Wollstonecraft discerns how large-scale commerce can lead to a “dying heart” (CL, 295), and how a dying heart, as a product of culture and history, betrays society’s fault lines. The conversational nature of her text allows for what appears to the reader to be a free association of ideas, but in reality is a carefully structured juxtaposition of images to expose their underlying connections: she pairs observations on Scandinavian culture and the people she meets with criticism of Imlay’s character and philosophies on human development; anecdotes of her journey

and vibrant depictions of Sublime landscapes with traumatic memories and agonizing allusions to her internal emotional state. She links her autobiography inextricably to theories on Romantic aesthetics, a philosophy of the Sublime subject, and a critique of capitalism, and in the space of her own bodily experience she merges utopian dreams of an ideal empire to a moral beauty felt on the minutest scale. She recognizes inconstant lovers, failed fathers, jilted mothers and ill-fated daughters⁴ as a manifestation of the weaknesses in the society that created them.

To understand her vision, the deep, passionate, boundless subject it reveals, and the social repercussions that revelation produces through reader-response, I propose a close reading of the text in three sections which will build upon each other to demonstrate the above argument. In the first, I examine her conscious self-construction in the text using romantic tropes and a psychogeographic relation to space to express her subjectivity to the reader. In the second, I explore her use of the characters she meets to engage the reader in a critique of Imlay, linking his betrayal to a broader social failure rooted in capitalism and connected, even, to an Enlightenment worldview. In the third, I return to her use of romantic tropes to construct a Sublime subject through an aesthetics of the heart, designed to free Wollstonecraft and the feminine subject from her social fetters by transforming the reader. Ultimately, it is through a seduction of the soul of her readership that Wollstonecraft achieves her ends, personal and political.

Geography of the Heart: A Psychogeographic Self-Construction

If Wollstonecraft herself serves as signpost, it follows that every word she writes, every observation she makes, every story she tells possesses a dual nature. These stories simultaneously serve as an inquiry into the subject itself—whether it be Norwegian table

⁴ Wollstonecraft writes of her daughter, “Hapless woman! what fate is thine?”; “I bemoan lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or her principles to her heart” (55)

manners or quarry technology—and the political implications of its unique relation to larger social mechanisms, and bear witness to her character, shaping a subjectivity for her readership which transcends existing social limits. To recognize the personal within the political, the interior concerns overlaid like a translucent sheet upon the exterior structures, each description a living metaphor for her internal existence, without overvaluing the individual at the expense of broader concerns seems impossible—one might accuse both Wollstonecraft and myself of trivializing her political goals and philosophical career. And yet, to do so would be a failure to comprehend her ultimate objective. Imagine *Letters* as a map Wollstonecraft constructs for us, in which she has superimposed her own complex psychological geography upon a rendering of the Scandinavian landscape and a critical blueprint of existing western cultural patterns. In their union we gain a novel perspective, a new chart, complete with sign-posts pointing the way, with which to explore individual concerns within their broadest cultural context. The dual nature of Wollstonecraft's journey—into the wilds of Norway and into the innermost reaches of herself, from the personal to the political—offers a unique topography that we can use to reconstruct her—and our—social vision and to navigate our social development.

To this end, the paradigm of “psycho geography” proves useful in our close reading of her text. Geographer Guy Debord (1953) first defined this concept in his introduction to *A Critique of Urban Geography* as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.” Robert Macfarlane clarifies the idea in his review of Iain Sinclair's *Edge of Orizon*, in “Psycho geography: A Beginner's Guide,” suggesting that, for Debord, psycho geography was a way to “explode the herd-thinking of the urban masses, and to disrupt their choreographed obedience to the sign-making habits of capitalism.” A psycho geographic mapping requires an

explorer to utilize the *dérive*, or drift, and ramble through a landscape, direction dictated by a random set of guidelines—a vaguely defined, half-mad attempt to recover a stolen ship, observe Scandinavian culture, and repair a broken heart, for example—recording her internal responses to the space itself, including constructed spaces such as buildings, streets, signs, as well as ‘natural’ spaces. For Debord and the Situationist Movement, this idea had immense potential to redefine the way we react to and think about our surroundings:

The production of psychogeographical maps, or even the introduction of alterations such as more or less arbitrarily transposing maps of two different regions, can contribute to clarifying certain wanderings that express not subordination to randomness but total insubordination to habitual influences.⁵

The seemingly random nature of the exploration, the “insubordination,” Debord speaks of allowed an individual to break free from internalized cultural patterns of viewing a land or cityscape. An alteration in perspective, in the way one *sees* one’s surrounding produces a transformation of one’s interior spaces, the mental and emotional states of the “wanderer” Debord suggests that the “charmingly vague adjective *psychogeographical* can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.” With Debord’s leave, we may slightly redefine the boundaries and uses of psychogeography: certainly if a change in spatial perspective transforms one’s interiority, then it follows that an alteration of one’s psyche will affect one’s view and interpretation of exterior spaces.

Unquestionably, the traumatic events which jarred Wollstonecraft loose from Paris and London, the memories and desires which hounded her, pursuing her to the wild northern territories, through foreign cities, along rocky coastlines, and into dramatic mountain scenes can

⁵ See Guy Debord’s “An Introduction to A Critique of Urban Geography” (1955)

be defined as both a psychological and physical “alteration of perspective.” Wollstonecraft’s interiority informs her observations throughout her travels—she “view[s] every thing with the jaundice eye of melancholy” (169) and from the vantage point of one who has “a heart that leaps up”; so too is her psyche transformed by the act of movement, the drift of the journey, and effect of the dramatically diverse spaces she moves through. Although Debord was most likely making a more literal reference, Wollstonecraft did indeed “transpose two maps of different regions”—an internal topography and an external one—using each to clarify the other, the goal being a “total *insubordination* to habitual influences.” In other words, she intended the shock of spatial difference to help her break physical and emotional ties to a god who had forsaken her, enabling her to recognize and—in doing so—throw off the cultural shackles which limited and subordinated her sense of subjectivity, confining her to a narrow narrative path and keeping her fettered to a Self-Other dialectic that could not possibly free her.

What we encounter in *Letters* then is, in fact, a triple layering of psychogeographic journeys: the first stratum being her initial physical journey into Scandinavia and through a tumultuous interior space contoured by emotional extremes, heights and depressions caused by Imlay’s fair-weather letters. The second psychogeographic layering is her return journey through memories of her travels—exterior and interior—all now inverted, internalized and experienced within her present context, newly defined by an intent to survive and use her lingering pain to spark a social revolution. In this doubly interior space of memory, the external forms of the Scandinavian landscape—now internalized—contain her previous experience of interiority, effectively preserving and translating it. Through language, she re-externalizes the space for a reader who, in experiencing the text, will set off on their own psychogeographic journey through her externalized interior. Complicating these already complex processes, Wollstonecraft had to

inhabit her reader's future interior experience of the spaces she describes in order to calculate her construction of the text for a particular effect. Thus, *Letters* collapses time and space in a dizzying series of inversions that take place on different experiential planes of space, memory, and language. The crucial point around which this reading pivots, however, is that Wollstonecraft constructs her subjectivity in a psychogeographic relation to space for the reader, her transcendent projected Other, to achieve a specific end.

If Wollstonecraft's journey to Scandinavia shifts perspective, space itself seems to follow new rules in her text, reflecting a parallel shift in the psyche. As she enters Norway, she remarks that a mile suddenly expanded to 24,000 English yards (199); here was a place in which time can be "cheated" (177) or "killed" (196) with wandering, where "rude materials of creation" and "unwrought space" (10) abound, where meadows can "dilate the emotions" (14) birthing new ideas, where the "bracing cold" of a climate can mentally prepare a wanderer for its hardships, where "empty estates" can create a "stupid kind of sadness," and raw coastline is a "Bastille" for the soul (102). Wollstonecraft forges a direct link for the reader between the space she inhabits and her mind; by removing her "habitual influences" and journeying into a strange, incontestably liminal space, she opens herself—and her reader—up, creating the conditions for psychological transformation. The vastness of the landscape expands our horizon, literally and figuratively, giving her a unique perspective on her previous life, a birds-eye view of her relationship with Imlay and its broader socio-cultural implications, and ultimately, the language with which to express insubordinate ideas. In journeying through memory and landscape she shakes off what compliant impulses remained, freeing her mind and body from the limitations which hampered her while located within the society she critiqued, enabling her to transcend the normative limits of her everyday world and re-imagine her narrative identity—and its socio-political

implications—within the context of a new ideological bulwark, spatially reinforced by the wild landscape she moves through.

To seduce the reader, engaging their emotions in order to align them with her in the coming social revolution, Wollstonecraft constructs a narrator carefully calculated to appeal to them. Her method is simple: she uses Romantic tropes to construct her psychogeographic vision. Sublimated by Enlightenment culture, the emotional experience of the individual had already begun to reemerge, encoded in art and literature, in a system of symbols linking the psyche to landscape. Wollstonecraft harnesses this already built-in system of aesthetics to translate the interior of her subject for the reader. To begin with, travel itself—to experience the Sublime, the beautiful and the picturesque landscapes of Europe—associates her, in the reader's mind, with an educated, leisure class for whom travel was considered a necessary means of self-development and cultivation. But Wollstonecraft, of course, skewed the Grand Tour tradition, not only by being a woman traveler, but by journeying North with a baby and a nursemaid into the wilds of Norway during a time when most men preferred the well-worn routes to southern Europe. That Wollstonecraft, self-exiled from the perfunctory drawing rooms of London and turning away from the typical Romantic tourism of her day, set off into the wild heart of man and nature, drawn first to the revolutionary fire of Paris and then to the raw landscapes of Scandinavia, was itself a testament to an extra-ordinary, independent, insurrectionary spirit. For her readers, her journey North appeared daring, even dangerous; her descriptions of sleeping on ships' decks and alone in wastelands, meadows, and mountain slopes of unfamiliar places, elemental and strange, emphasized her role as a solitary traveler and carried an undeniable undercurrent of sexual threat, portraying her as both strong and vulnerable.

Knowing she was journeying into dangerous territory, literally and figuratively speaking, and that the very nature of her travels had the potential to alienate more conservative readers, Wollstonecraft carefully cultivated an image quite different than the fearless, imposing, even combative one she championed in *Vindication*, instead depicting herself as a gentle woman with a boundless, unshakable love for her daughter and husband. While never calling Imlay—or his betrayal—by name, she communicates the intricacies of their relationship and his desertion obliquely. Addressing each of the letters to an intimate “you,” Wollstonecraft reveals to the reader her private self, familiar and unassuming, as well as the depth of her love. At moments she refers to him in playfully angry tones spouses might recognize: when she says, “Do not start—I am not going to trouble you with a dull catalog” (167), one can almost see her rolling her eyes at her imagined version of Imlay’s reaction to an exhaustive list of details which, the reader assumes (having encountering the meticulous descriptions of table settings in her first letter), is typical of Wollstonecraft. At other moments she recalls previous conversations, giving the impression they were in the middle of a life interrupted: “I almost forgotten to tell you... I didn’t leave Norway without making inquiries after the monsters said to have been seen in the northern sea” (34), she remarks, at which the reader imagines Imlay having teased her about elusive northern sea-monsters just before her departure. Perhaps most effectively, after referencing a shared joke or the recollection of a sensual memory of Imlay the reader is not privy to, her “heart flutters” discomposed (110), she feels the flush not of pleasure but of pain, and, pages later, admits, “I walked out, for the open air is always my remedy when an aching-head proceeds from an oppressed heart” (22).⁶ She links the interior memory of physical and emotional love

⁶This idea echoes throughout her original letters, she writes: “The post is again arrived; I have sent to seek for letters, only to be wounded to the soul by a negative.—My brain seems on fire. I must go into the air” (CL, 312).

overdetermined by awareness of impending desertion, with physical space of wild nature, and in doing so reassigns the customarily safe and cozy containment of home as a now restrictive, suffocating, even perilous space to her psyche—a physical reminder the dreams she is now alienated from. Exposed to the elements, her present pain, increased by the memory of pleasure, becomes easier for her to bear and more apparent to the reader. In these moments, the reader is acutely aware of her lover's betrayal and, to the recommendation of her character, her refusal to accuse him. Her reproaches are evident only through gentle and subtle references to her own emotional state: "Eleven days of weariness on board a vessel not intended for the accommodation of passengers have so exhausted my spirits, to say nothing of the other causes, with which you are already sufficiently acquainted, that it is with some difficulty I adhere to my determination of giving you my observations" (7), she writes upon her arrival, signaling to the reader that all was not well with the relationship. Upon viewing a landscape she remarks: "I closed my eyes on a world where I was destined to wander alone" (109); and later: "But let me now stop; I may be a little partial, and view every thing with the jaundice eye of melancholy—for I am sad—and have cause" (169), and still later: "Why should I weep for myself. Take, O world! Thy much indebted tear" (194). These comments reveal a woman quietly struggling with melancholy in the face of betrayal; they characterize her—for the reader—as generous, selfless, patient. Rather than the primary vehicle by which to express her psyche, however, these moments engage the reader's affection and respect for her faultless behavior, and their disapprobation of Imlay.

Wollstonecraft's references to her daughter and to motherhood further deepen the reader's awareness of her as both nurturing and selfless. The references in her original letters to suicidal-matricidal desires—I have looked at the sea, and at my child, hardly daring to own to

myself the secret wish, that it might become our tomb; and that the heart, still so alive to anguish, might there be quieted by death” (CL 297)⁷—are carefully written out, leaving softer reminders that she cannot bear to be parted from her daughter, references to a “weak melancholy that hung about m heart at parting with my daughter for the first time” (54). Knowing her firm stance against wet-nurses and for comprehensive female education from her earlier political works, the reader weaves these recollections in with her traditional domestic images of her “Fanniken” (110). Yet, Wollstonecraft’s motherly concerns for her daughter’s well-being extend beyond the present far into her future. Gazing at her sleeping daughter, she writes:

You know that as a female I am particularly attached to her—I feel more than a mother’s fondness and anxiety, when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex. I dread lest she should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principles, or principles to her heart. With trembling hand I shall cultivate sensibility, and cherish delicacy of sentiment, let, whilst I lend fresh blushes to the rose, I sharpen the thorns that will wound the breast I would fain guard—I dread to unfold her mind, lest it should render her unfit for the world she is to inhabit—Hapless woman! what a fate is thine! (55)

Apart from the chilling prophetic nature of her words,⁸ Wollstonecraft effectively communicates motherly concern for her child while linking her own private grief with the fate of the feminine subject in general, identifying social subjugation of women as the underlying threat endangering them all. Wollstonecraft carefully constructs the scene to soften the revolutionary message by embedding them within traditional forms of femininity. Even more striking, as calculated as the scene may now appear to our analytical gaze, it is unmistakably sincere. The sentiment she expresses and the mode by and the passion with which she conveys it is *honest*, rooted directly in

⁷ “At this moment ten thousand complicated sentiments press for utterance, weigh on my heart, and obscure my sight” (CL, 297) she continues.

⁸ Fanny Imlay commits suicide at age 19 for reasons unknown. Most believe it was over heartbreak; she committed suicide just months after Shelley ran away with her 15 year old sister—he visited her the day before her suicide. He wrote a poem about her death, encompassing more grief than there is written record of him having expressed of his first wife, who committed suicide while pregnant months after he abandoned her.

the true-to-life original letters. Wollstonecraft gives her reader the impression—an accurate one—that the feelings contained in *Letters Written During a Short Residence* are indicative of the real life subject.

These autobiographical characterizations represent only one facet of Wollstonecraft's self-construction for the reader, serving to engage her reader's affections for a character in possession of many of the traits typically valued in feminine subjects—patience, nurturing, loyalty, playfulness, delicate sensuality—as well as many of those praised in men—brave, adventurous, imaginative, strong-willed. Yet hers is a subject that reaches beyond these gendered constructs, and it is only through her use of Romantic tropes, by mapping her psyche upon the landscape and culture of Scandinavia, that she can translate the full reaches of her subjectivity for the reader, ultimately winning the reader over to her personal cause and broader political goals. Thus, the suicidal longings, the intense grief and depression that plagued Wollstonecraft throughout her real journey is never directly expressed,⁹ rather it is sublimated and reemerges in the landscape itself, which serves as a built-in amplification system capable of exteriorizing and expressing the full potency of an otherwise incommunicable interiority, by eliciting a similar experience within the reader.

To survive an interior thrown into chaos, Wollstonecraft exteriorizes unbearable pain—pain too big for a body—embedding it within the landscape itself in order to walk through it, to identify it. She journeys into the wild space of her own heart. I had that feeling once. After experiencing a prolonged illness and a single event which produced grief of the deepest kind, I found myself coincidentally on a three day hiking trip into the Alps, through rocky caverns,

⁹ There are one or two references to her suicidal past, but these are so subtle, they are potentially only evident to a reader already in-the-know. The presence of—and longing for death—will be addressed in our final section.

along cliff's edges, my view impeded until the very end by the sheer stone faces and broad backs of mountains. It didn't stop raining for three days; mist had settled into the pine forests at the base of the trail and made the stones at the higher altitudes slick and treacherous. Barely able to stand on my precarious footing, but somehow able to move, I scabbled over stone possessed by the distinct, uncanny feeling I was hiking into the sublime wreckage of my own heart. For Wollstonecraft, who had experienced acute trauma, who was facing a solitary life as an abandoned—and publicly shamed woman—with mounting debt, no livelihood, a child, and that kind of corrosive despair that comes of betrayal,¹⁰ the parallels between her interiority and the steep and jagged coastline, the endless waters, the solitary landscape, she could not have been but conscious of, every waking moment.

Her descriptions lead the reader into the geography of her pain. At the beginning of her journey, she describes their boat becalmed at sea: “My attention was particularly directed to the lighthouse; and you can scarcely imagine with what anxiety I watched two long hours for a boat to emancipate me—still no one appeared. Every cloud that flitted on the horizon was hailed as a liberator, till approaching nearer, like most of the prospects sketched by hope, it dissolved under the eye into disappointment” (7). Having set out on her trip with Imlay's firm promise to meet her in Hamburg several months later, she—knowing the end of the story—foreshadows the conclusion of her journey and, through her reference to “prospects sketched by hope” expands the metaphor to their relationship, characterizing Imlay as a cloud masquerading as a boat, and furthermore as her potential *liberator*, supporting our hypothesis of the role their relationship played in freeing her from restrictive social fetters. At times her ship is becalmed, and she fears “that we had lost our way, and were straying amidst a labyrinth of rocks” (136); as the ship sails

¹⁰ Wollstonecraft calls it a “canker worm in my bosom” (CL, 307)

up the coast she writes: “the huge, dark rocks that looked like the rude materials of creation forming the barrier of unwrought space, forcibly struck me... (10) “rocks were piled on rocks, forming a suitable bulwark to the ocean. Come no further, they emphatically said, turning their dark sides to the waves to augment the idle roar. The view was steryl...I gazed around with rapture, and felt more of that spontaneous pleasure which gives credibility to our expectation of happiness, than I had for a long, long time before. I forgot the horrors I had witnessed in France, which had cast a gloom over all nature...damped by the tears of disappointed affection, to be lighted up afresh, care took wing while simple fellow feeling expanded my heart...dilating the emotions which were painfully concentrated” (14). The “barrier of unwrought space” formed by “the rude materials of creation,” much like the Paris Barrier which marked the beginning of her relationship with Imlay and the conception of their daughter, produces terror and pleasure in equal measure, serving as the gateway warning Wollstonecraft and the reader away from the wild spaces beyond even as it draws us in. Later she’ll find comfort in the “Spirits unseen” that “seem to walk abroad, and flit from cliff to cliff, to sooth my soul to peace” and “reluctantly return to supper, to be shut up in a warm room, only to view the vast shadows of the rocks extending on the slumbering waves,”—“before I came here,” she writes, “I could scarcely have imagined that s a simple object, rocks, could have admitted so many interesting combinations—always grand, and often sublime” (106-7) Yet, what freedom she finds in the wild landscape easily dissipates; “I felt the confinement and wished for wings,” she writes, “ and later, “I felt my breath oppressed, though nothing could be clearer than the atmosphere,” and the final pronouncement, “To be born here, was to be bastilled by nature—shut out from all that opens the understanding, or enlarges the heart” (102-3); one might as well remove “here” from that sentence or replace it with “a woman” to gauge Wollstonecraft’s meaning. In true Romantic and

psychogeographic fashion, the appearance of the landscape is shaped by the state of the viewer's interior even as it alters her emotional topography. The desolation of the landscape can in equal measure reflect her despair and trigger it, because she has internalized the Romantic tropes of her cultural context. Flight, referenced in a number of important scenes, in addition to this one, takes on an important role in the text; her wish to take off and separate herself from the landscape is to free herself from the pain, the memories, and the significance that the physical space contains.

Not only does she map the geography of her interior upon the landscape through descriptions and juxtapositions with emotional reference, but she does so by physically positioning herself in relation to the space. In one scene she depicts herself a wild thing: "Here I have frequently strayed, sovereign of the waste, I seldom met any human creature; and sometimes, reclining on the mossy down, under the shelter of a rock, the prattling of the sea amongst the pebbles has lulled me to sleep—no fear of any rude satyr's approaching to interrupt my repose" (73). A woman sleeping alone and unprotected in nature would immediately have sparked associations in the reader's mind with "Green World" traditions of revelry and sexual vulnerability, associations reinforced by her reference to the myth of the satyr who posed a sexual threat to unchaperoned young women, used to frighten girls into behaving. Yet she is unaffected: "Balmy were the slumbers, and oft the gales, that refreshed me, when I awoke to follow, with an eye vaguely curious, the white sails, as they turned the cliffs, or seemd to take shelter under the pines which covered the little islands that so gracefully rose to render the terrific ocean beautiful".¹¹ This particular scene had such a powerful effect on the Romantic imagination of her readership, that she—Sovereign of the Waste—inspired Coleridge's "Kubla

¹¹ Between the Satyr, the images of a Queen of nature, the white sails, fairies, and balmy slumbers, Wollstonecraft is most probably referencing Titania's "Set your heart at rest" speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Khan”: “As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted / By a woman wailing for her demon-lover.” Coleridge inverted Wollstonecraft’s image of a powerful woman, master of her wasteland heart, kept safe from satyrs by a landscape which could “harmonize into tranquility,” instead revealing a haunted creature seething with desire, wandering aimlessly. I believe Coleridge’s reading is contained in Wollstonecraft’s imagery, that indeed her description encompasses both pain and pleasure, power and weakness, desire and innocence.

Upon waking and viewing the natural scene about her, her desire to merge, body and soul, with the landscape reaches its climax: “With what ineffable pleasure have I not gazed—and gazed again, losing my breath through my eyes—my very soul diffused itself in the scene—and seeming to become all senses, glided in the scarcely agitated waves, melted in the freshening breeze, or, taking its flight with fairy wing, to the misty mountains which bounded the prospect, fancy tript over new lawns more beautiful even than lovely slopes on the winding shore before me.” Immediately she links the ecstatic experience of landscape with recollections of “reveries of childhood” and Christianity, by ending with a “bow[ed] before the awful throne of my creator” (73-4). Wollstonecraft has an instinct for public relations. She is constantly approaching the edge, pushing the limits of accepted cultural discourse, and then, with a subtle twist, placating the reader so they cannot tell they have participated in the transgression of their own narrow limits. The uncanny mix of innocence and longing that Coleridge picked up on, the deep, unchecked yet unspoken desire manifests in Wollstonecraft’s positioning of her own body within the space; she carefully transitions the vulnerable body of her subject, through sensual and imaginative experience of the space, dissipating all physical barriers, liberating her subject from the social restrictions on the female form, and freeing her soul by merging it with nature. Her longing transcends body; she is no longer limited to sexual categories of seduction of a

masculine Other, but to something much greater, closer to a relation with God, or to a child-like relation to the world.

Immediately on the heels of this passage, she imagines Imlay's—and possibly the reader's—rebuttal of this sensual, unrestrained experience of nature both within and without:

You have sometimes wondered, my dear friend, at the extreme affection of my nature—But such is the temperature of my soul—It is not the vivacity of youth, the hey-day of existence. For years have I endeavored to calm an impetuous tide—labouring to make my feelings take an orderly course.—It was striving against the stream. —I must love and admire with warmth, or I sink into sadness. Tokens of love which I have received have rapt me in Elysium—purifying the heart they enchanted.—My bosom still glows.—Do not saucily ask, repeating Sterne's question, "Maria, is it still so warm?" Sufficiently, O my God! Has it been chilled by sorrow and unkindness—still nature will prevail—and if I blush at recollecting past enjoyment, it is the rosy hue of pleasure heightened by modesty; for the blush of modesty and shame are as distinct as the emotions by which they are produced. (74-75)

Together these scenes offer a clear example of Wollstonecraft's consciously constructed psychogeographic relation to landscape, reading, in the geography of the space she moves through, an interior topography struggling to the surface. The psychogeography of the scene is calculated to have a number of specific effects on the reader. First, the intensity with which she can experience and feel nature releases those emotions in an acceptable—and aesthetic form—which she must sublimate in her relation with Imlay and society, simultaneously illustrating her depth and sense of "modesty" or rather her awareness of and adherence to social norms. She further alludes to her past struggle between Enlightenment ideals, "labouring to make [her] feelings take an orderly course" and a Romantic surrender to them, a struggle which, sharing the same cultural heritage, would echo in the reader's own experience. Furthermore, in referring to Sterne's innocent faithful Maria, betrayed by a lover and left brokenhearted, she characterizes Imlay as unfaithful and—in noting his surprise at the undiminished state of her love—superficial, even while again revealing the depth, loyalty, modesty, and purity of her own love. The

landscape and the shared cultural language of Romanticism becomes the vehicle by which Wollstonecraft can translate the otherwise inexpressible interior topography of her subjectivity and her experience of betrayal—the “ten thousand complicated sentiments...[which] weigh on [her] heart”—not to Imlay, but to the reader.

From the Personal to the Political: A Capital Critique and a Social Revolution

In addition to emotionally infused landscape description, Wollstonecraft crafts her subjectivity for her readership through empathetic relation to the characters she meets along the way. While this is a common literary trope, used by some Romantics—Wordsworth in “Michael,” for example—to communicate emotions and ideas that are meaningful to the writer, Wollstonecraft moves beyond empathy, instead creating a specifically psychogeographic relation to those she meets. Through her reconstruction of their stories for her readers, she offers more of the details of her life and reveals her own capacity for empathy; at the same time she identifies her primary socio-political concerns in clear terms, ultimately rallying the reader to her cause by linking her personal reality—and the reader’s engagement with it—with these broader social issues. Wollstonecraft constructs herself in *Letters* through these characters as a sign-post for social change and, in doing so, she asks us to read her travels, her life, and her psyche as a living metaphor, a barometer indicating the weaknesses in the socio-cultural framework which prevents necessary progress in human development.

Tellingly, the women Wollstonecraft identifies with transgress class boundaries; she relates to beggars and queens alike. In Norway, she describes the story of a wet nurse, abandoned by her lover and “wonders whether the world was created to exhibit every possible combination of wretchedness...here I am again, to talk of anything but estranged affection and the loneliness of a deserted heart” (80). In Copenhagen, surveying a city in ruins, she “treads on live ashes” spending pages exonerating the queen who had recently died, imprisoned for an adulterous

relationship with the doctor of her husband, the insane King Christian VII. “Poor Matilda! thou hast haunted me ever since my arrival,” she exclaims calling to the deceased, an invisible friend in a strange city; and to the reader: “I am now fully convinced that she was the victim of the party she displaced, who would have overlooked, or encouraged, her attachment, had her lover not, aiming at being usefully attempted to overturn some established abuses before the people, ripe for the change, had sufficient spirit to support him when struggling in their behalf.”

Wollstonecraft clarifies: forced into marrying the king, trapped by the politics of gender, if Matilda “had an attachment for him [the doctor], it did not disgrace her heart or her understanding, the king being a notorious debauchee, and an idiot into the bargain.” As to the rumor that the doctor and she had conspired to drug the king, she dismisses it outright, noting “they had better have accused them of dabbling in the black art; for the potent spell still keeps his wits in bondage” (153-4). In relaying this narrative, she asks her reader to redefine the parameters of decency, adhering not to traditional notions of proprieties—the equivalent of red-tape technicalities, but to the greater sense of moral rectitude that comes of looking Matilda as a full subject being used as a pawn. She presses the case of the feminine subject, illustrating her objectification at the highest level of society, the entrapment and misuse of her—body and soul—and the harsh consequences, the erasure of first social and then physical existence, of her attempt to gain command over her own fate. Wollstonecraft hints at Matilda’s capacity for love, linking it to her own, in order to engage the reader’s recognition of the tragedy of a full subject thus entrapped. As she wanders the incinerated city contemplating Matilda’s story, the reader is acutely aware that Wollstonecraft herself feels trapped under the weight of suppressed pain, having received devastating news.

Furthermore, by referencing the doctor's attempt to revolutionize a failing social system and introduce much needed reforms to those not yet receptive to change, Wollstonecraft subtly associates in the reader's mind the need for social reform and the idea that large scale cultural modes of gender oppression produce devastating consequences on the individual level. This subtle juxtaposition finds its way into the text at other moments, upon beholding the cascade in Trolhaettae, for example. Here the breathtaking view of the waterfall is almost destroyed by the construction of a canal through the rock, the "grand proof of human industry . . . not calculated to warm the fancy," the "noble scene" and "awful roaring of the impetuous torrents" almost ruined by the "blowing up of rock," the "noise of human instruments . . . the bustle of workmen" whose activity "only resembled the insignificant sport of children" compared with the grand masses" of rock that "trembled in the darkened air"(142). Despite the pollution of industry, she encounters a series of preserved "cataracts, rushing from different falls, struggling with the huge masses of rock...a little island stood in the midst, covered with firs, which, by dividing the torrent, rendered it more picturesque"; at the sight of this, "the centre of the earth" she writes: "I gazed I know not how long, stunned with the noise; and growing giddy with only looking at the never ceasing tumultuous motion...scarcely conscious where I was when I observed a boy, half obscured by the sparkling foam, fishing under the impending rock on the other side. How he had descended I could not perceive . . . It looked like an abode fit for an eagle" (143). She watches the falls, standing on a "stone bridge" herself. A psychogeographic reading of this scene links the "tumultuous motion" of the water with the "tumultuous emotions" and "impetuous tide" of her own interior unable to be contained by industry or reason, emotions which she is only able to keep abreast of by bridging them, for herself as much as for the second viewer, the reader. The power and beauty of the landscape mirrors—for the reader well-versed in Romanticism—that of

the soul of its viewer. In addition to a subtle critique of human industry, and the externalization of a powerful psyche, Wollstonecraft highlights here the inexplicable accessibility the boy has to a place that, to her, seems unreachable, unattainable. Considering that just a few pages later, she will quote *King Lear, IV*: “As flies to wanton boys, are we to gods; They kill us for their sport” (154), in reference to Matilda’s situation, not making an observation of the human condition, but rather an explicit critique of female and male relations, her envy of the boy fishing in the powerful current of the waterfall, a child accessing that which she is denied by virtue of gender, acts as subliminal message to her reader asking them to reassign their notions of gender relations. In first engaging the reader’s affections, enabling them to identify with her, Wollstonecraft creates the conditions necessary for them to *experience* the injustice of gender oppression through her stories.

Her social critique is not always so subtle. She presents narratives of admirable revolutionaries throughout her travelogue, inevitably linking them with her personal experience so as to engage the reader for her cause. Upon meeting the bailiffs of Christiana, she recognizes the “cloven foot of despotism,” her “fire of fancy” dies to melancholy as she considers “the ills that harass such a large portion of mankind,” she writes: “I felt like a bird fluttering on the ground unable to mount; yet unwilling to crawl tranquilly like a reptile whilst still conscious it had wings” (121-2). This highly personal, intensely emotional reaction to meeting what she terms “political monsters” (122)—one which references the many moments she imagines flying free from her own constraints—is immediately followed by a visit to the prison. She goes there in order to gaze upon the face of a prisoner—now slave— behind the “iron grate,” who induced a farmer’s revolt; “He must have possessed some eloquence, or have had truth on his side; for the farmers rose by hundreds to support him” (122), and, recollecting her encounter with the

bailiffs, she writes, with a reference to the French Revolution, “It is not necessary to trace the origin of the association of ideas, which led me to think that the stars and gold keys, which surrounded me the evening before, disgraced the wearers, as much as the fetters I was viewing—perhaps more. I even began to investigate the reason which led me to suspect that the former produced the latter” (123). Through these narratives she begins to make her case for a social revolution, linking the personal choices of villains as well as revolutionaries, the failings and insurrectionary desires of a nation’s people, with the greater forces of culture and politics which dictate them.

Her defense of the executed prisoner, falsely accused of starting the Copenhagen fire as a revolutionary plot, offers further proof of her vision. She writes: “I am more and more convinced that the same energy of character, which renders a man a daring villain, would have rendered him useful to society, had that society been well organized. When a strong mind is not disciplined by cultivation, it is a sense of injustice that renders it unjust” (156), unmistakably attributing the personal troubles of an individual to the failure of society. She goes so far as to associate him with the British prime minister who might, she writes, “with as little foundation, be accused” by other nations “of wishing to set the world on fire” (157). Under Wollstonecraft’s pen, the boundaries of class and culture dissipate, to reveal the barebones structure of human interrelationships from the micro to the macro scales, both its flaws and its potential. Instead of the accused man who, she argues, has been made an unjust example of, she holds the accusers accountable, the “flock of idle gazers” (155) who watched “the reality as a show,” who drank “a glass of the criminal’s blood as an infallible remedy for the apoplexy,” a single sacrifice erroneously believed to stop the bleeding of the internal structures of the human—and social—body; these, she indicates, are the real savages, those truly responsible parties never held

accountable, the people “of property” who, if they “had taken half as much pains to extinguish the fire, as to preserve their valuables and furniture” (151), could have prevented much of the damage. Her critique, she says, is not only meant to demonstrate “the ignorance of the people, but to censure the government, for not preventing scenes that throw an odium on the human race” (157). Through these examples, she constructs an argument for the interrelation of the political and the personal, and a utopian vision of a society that can, when necessary, restructure itself for the benefit of its inhabitants. Like the sentiment behind the French Revolution she was notoriously in support of, the reader begins to sense that, in Wollstonecraft’s mind, a structure sometimes need be razed to the ground before it can be rebuilt.

While she tackles the social organization in its entirety, from its laws and its economics, to its familial structures and customs, the “oppressed state of [her] sex,” the freeing of the feminine subject, is unmistakably her main concern, one expressed most privately and convincingly as she gazed upon her daughter, and pronounced to the reader that by the dictates of society, that “she must one day sacrifice her heart to her principles or principles to her heart” (54). If she begins to get the reader thinking about social revolution in general, she focuses their uprising to a specific purpose, through a complicated critique of society that identifies the connection between her private experience of Imlay’s betrayal (now shared by the reader) and the resulting pain, with a flaw in society’s fabric she attributes to capitalism. She sets up this critique first by requiring the reader to recognize his moral deficiency by comparison. She writes of a soldier, dishonorably discharged for not taking up his post in a house belonging to a widow, intimating that he readily chose to give up his own professional life, his good name and livelihood, rather than cause her discomfort or pain (42); of the Norwegians she comments, “A man who has been detected in any dishonest act, can no longer live among them. He is

universally shunned and shame becomes the severest punishment . . . The descriptions,” she writes, “I have received of them carried me back to the fables of the golden age: independence and virtue; affluence without vice; cultivation of mind without depravity of heart. . . I want faith! My imagination hurries me forward to seek an asylum in such a retreat from all the disappointments I am threatened with; but reason drags me back, whispering that the world is still the world, and man the same compounds of weakness and folly, who must occasionally excite love and disgust, admiration and contempt” (128). Her disappointments, the reader fully realizes by this time, are occasioned by the betrayal of the mysterious “you,” Imlay, who it can be assumed has not been “universally shunned,” a fact which reflects the moral deficiency of the society that supports him. She gets even more explicit: in describing how the Danish youths sometimes gain “the privilege of husbands” with their lovers, the family “willfully blind,” “it happens very rarely that these honorary engagements are dissolved or disregarded, a stigma being attached to a breach of faith which is thought more disgraceful, if not so criminal, as the violation of the marriage law” (160-1). Making a distinction between the breaking of a vow and a law, Wollstonecraft elevates the *felt* morality above the legal technicality. This description follows closely on the heels of her observation that if “women, in general, are seduced by their superiors, and men jilted by their inferiors; rank and manners awe the one, and cunning and wantonness subjugate the other; ambition creeping into the woman’s passion, and tyranny giving force to the man’s; for most men treat their mistresses as kings do their favourites; ergo is not man the tyrant of the creation?” (160). Wollstonecraft perceives the unequal power relation between the sexes, identifying female sexual depravity as a bid for power where they have none, and male sexual depravity as a result of having too much. These examples, seamlessly woven into the text, construct for the reader an indirect yet searing critique of Imlay’s behavior,

identifying it within a failed social context through examples of societies whose structures—though flawed—prevents such behavior in order to foster a sound moral fabric in the individual life.

While Wollstonecraft's inquiry into morality enables the reader to begin to identify her personal griefs and Imlay's immorality as the direct result of greater social problems, she is not content to preach. Instead, she engages the reader's emotional commitment, through a psychogeographic imagery which draws on their shared Romantic cultural context. She asks Imlay, and the reader:

How much of the virtue which appears in the world, is put on for the world? And how little dictated by self respect—so little, that I am ready to repeat the old question—and ask, where is truth or rather principle to be found? These are, perhaps, the outpourings of a heart ill at ease—the effusions of a sensibility wounded almost to madness. But enough of this—we will discuss the subject in another state of existence—where truth and justice will reign. How cruel are the injuries which make us quarrel with human nature!—At present black melancholy hovers round my footsteps; and the sorrow sheds a mildew over all the future prospects, which hope no longer gilds. (117-18)

By pairing her direct critique of the superciliousness and moral bankruptcy of society in general with a reference to her own heart “ill at ease” and a sensibility “wounded almost to madness,” she indirectly yet clearly indicates for the reader (while remaining as yet un-accusing) that Imlay embodied this kind of emptiness, while at the same time defines sensibility as a moral barometer. The pointed observation is followed by a psychogeographic description in which nothing is as it seems: she observes rocks enclosing valleys (small units encapsulating larger ones), lakes appearing as branches, streams prattling, stones shaken loose from the mountainsides giving fantastical shapes to trees and baring their buried roots—in each of these images the inner stock of something is either hidden or revealed. She writes: “It is not in fact surprising that the pine should be often undermined, it shoots its fibres in such a horizontal direction, merely on the surface of the earth, requiring only enough to cover those that cling to the craggs. Nothing proves

to me so clearly that it is the air which principally nourishes trees and plants as the flourishing appearance of these pines.—The firs, demanding a deeper soil are seldom seen in equal health, or so numerous” (118). One imagines Imlay a pine, with his shallow roots, his sustenance—and substance—nothing but air, and Wollstonecraft a fir, more rare, more sensitive, requiring deeper soil and something more substantial to nourish her. It is through her subtle and carefully calculated juxtaposition of social critique designed to employ the reader’s intellect and psychogeographic images of landscape expressed in Romantic terms which appeal to the reader’s aesthetic sensibility and emotion that Wollstonecraft begins to construct a vision for social reformation, one which ultimately will free the feminine subject.

Before she can offer a solution, however, she must pinpoint the problem. Slowly but surely, her critiques hone in on capitalism, identifying it as the ultimate impediment to moral development: seaports are not “favourable to improvement. The captains acquire a little superficial knowledge by travelling, which their indefatigable attention to the making of money prevents their digesting” (63); later she writes of bootleggers (bootlegging was Imlay’s primary entrepreneurial employment) as “depraved by a sordid love of money which repels me...Everywhere wealth commands too much respect; but here...it is the only object pursued—not through brake and briar, but over rocks and waves” (104-5); still later she notes, “You may think me too severe on commerce but from the manner it is at present carried on, little can be advanced in favour of a pursuit that wears out most sacred principles of humanity and rectitude. What is speculation, but a species of gambling,” (119-20); and upon observing “huge gothic piles” meant to exhibit a characteristic of sublimity and wildness,” suggests that “size without grandeur or eloquence has an emphatical stamp of meanness...a poverty of conception which only a commercial spirit could give” (125). She meets a man, toward the end of her journey, who

further argues her case: ““Why madam,” said he to me one day, “you will not meet with a man who has any calf to his leg; body and soul, muscles and heart, are equally shriveled up by a thirst of gain. . . .profit is their only stimulus, and calculations the sole employment of their faculties; unless we except some gross animal gratifications which, snatched at spare moments, tend still more to debase the character, because though touched by his tricking wand, they have all the arts, without the wit, of the wing-footed god”” (180). This criticism, presumably delivered by a masculine representative of an educated class, explicitly targets Imlay,¹² defining him in the reader’s mind as one who possessed art without depth, whose moral bankruptcy has led to the pursuit of money-making schemes and romantic dalliances based purely on lust in its flattest forms. Courtesy of this description, the reader views this “unnamed you” in a most unattractive light: as someone who, victim of his own capitalist appetites, is rotting, body and soul. She continues, extending her critique of capitalism to a much broader scale: “England and America owe their liberty to commerce, which created a new species of power to undermine the feudal system. But let them beware of the consequence; the tyranny of wealth is still more galling and debasing than that of rank” (129). From her perch, Wollstonecraft’s view is expansive; just as she perceives the dangers of Europe’s transition from an Old World Order to a new industry-based model, she accurately predicts, at the very moment of its birth, a nation’s ultimate failure to fulfill its utopian potential, foreseeing the “land of the free” divided by disparity and class-lines, a capitalist grid as unbending and ruthless as the iron grating of feudalist framework.

¹² It must be noted that Wollstonecraft was perhaps still talking directly to Imlay, attempting to goad him into becoming a better man, seeming in this case to level a barb—in the midst of her social critique—that might find its mark, targeting his more superficial sensibilities and anatomical preoccupations.

Wollstonecraft's assessment of the problem of capitalism is not limited to politics; she hints to the reader that it has corroded the purity of Enlightenment ideals, the exhaustive pursuit of money as power echoing the relentless pursuit of knowledge as power:

Men are strange machines; and their whole system of morality is in general held together by one grand principle, which loses its force the moment they allow themselves to break with impunity over the bounds which secured their self-respect. A man ceases to love humanity, and then individuals, as he advances in the chase after wealth; as one clashes with his interest, the other with his pleasures: to business, as it is termed, every thing must give way; nay, is sacrificed; and all the endearing charities of citizen, husband, father, brother, become empty names. But—but what? (190)

Her image is a cautionary one, in which man, overrun by capitalist desire, sacrifices concern for fellow man and, by extension, all of human feeling, moral decency, and soul, for his own gain. She argues that one cannot engage in immoral living in one aspect of their lives, without it overrunning one's soul and seeping into every other aspect. To place value exclusively on the accumulation of wealth, is to devalue the human heart and the relationships one has with fellow man on the micro and macro scales. Her use of mechanical imagery is no coincidence; in addition to impressing upon the reader the ties between the personal and the political, she reveals the primary source of individual immorality to be capitalism, and further identifies the problem of capitalist greed with an Enlightenment model which, she seems to be arguing, potentially leaches the moral code a society adheres to of its humanity. If the mind of man is a mechanism in possession of a clockwork morality which operates—free of the fire of emotion—by cold steel technics, a single slip of a cog, a technical misstep, renders the machine defunct, emptying it of its deeper purpose. The malfunction is not the fault of the machine, rather it may be attributed to its construction. With this, she sets the stage for her proposal of a new, more inclusive, one might say *organic* morality, which operates not on an emotionally bankrupt system of checks and balances, tuned to an exclusively external configuration, wearing a veneer of virtue “put on for

the world,” but which exists within the felt experience of the human body and soul. She has, in effect, delivered a critique which posits entrepreneurial Enlightenment ideals, bereft of emotion, and hijacked by capitalism, as the source of the debasement of human character, as the foundation of a system which ultimately objectifies people.

Her critique of capitalism, the testimony which links the capitalist drive to the debasement of one’s moral fiber and the ultimate bankruptcy of one’s character, culminates in a single, stunning accusation:

Situation seems to be the mould in which men’s characters are formed...that men entirely devoted to commerce never acquire, or lose, all taste and greatness of mind. An ostentatious display of wealth without elegance, and a greedy enjoyment of pleasure without sentiment, embrutes them till they term all virtue, of an heroic cast, romantic attempts at something above our nature; and anxiety about the welfare of others, a search after misery, in which we have no concern. But you will say that I am growing bitter, perhaps, personal. Ah! Shall I whisper to you—that you—yourself, are strangely altered, since you have entered deeply into commerce—more than you are aware of—never allowing yourself to reflect, and keeping your mind, or rather passions, in a continual state of agitation—Nature has given you talents, which lie dormant, or are wasted in ignoble pursuits—You will rouse yourself and shake off the vile dust that obscures you, or my understanding, as well as my heart, deceives me, egregiously—only tell me when? (187)¹³ [my ital]

Herein lies the crux of Wollstonecraft’s personal-political critique. In criticizing capitalism as the major source of moral decay in her society, identifying the commercial attitudes and the kind of masturbatory materialism that it fosters with the debasement of human heart, Wollstonecraft’s argument takes a startling turn: she embeds this social critique expressly in the “unnamed you,” in the physical and psychical space of Imlay, and ultimately in his betrayal of her.¹⁴

¹³ The echo of her final words to him, “I still believe you are not what you seem” is unmistakable here; although considering she wrote a work that publically shames Imlay, she could have no intention of reforming him now, thus it is more than likely that her positive thinking where the “unnamed you” is concerned is for her reader’s benefit, characterizing the spirit if not the technical reality of Wollstonecraft’s belief in the one she once loved.

¹⁴ She goes so far as to condemn mercenary ventures by comparing them to the slave trade: “These men, like the owners of negro ships, never smell the blood on their money the blood by which it has been gained, but sleep quietly in their beds, terming such occupations *lawful callings*; yet the lightening marks not their roofs, to thunder

To comprehend the leap she makes, we must understand that, at the time of the rise of capitalism, while entrepreneurial success was breaking down class boundaries and freeing upwardly mobile white middleclass men of the western world, it was reinforcing those boundaries elsewhere. Women and non-white men, of course, were excluded from these forms of profitable competition. Not only were they marginalized, however, but as capitalism erected itself along pre-established structures of gender relations which subjugated women, they were incorporated into the new system—not as subjects—but, objectified and commodified, as part of the merchandise whose abstracted value contributed to the currency by which men, through competition *with other men*, could orchestrate their social ascent. In the whirl of industrial ecstasy, with the pace of the western world moving exponentially faster, men were getting freer faster at the expense of the feminine subject. In a society which had primarily valued women only insofar as they fulfilled male desire, in a new system based on the insatiability of male desire and on the fundamental idea that nothing is ever enough, that there is always more and better to be had, a system which rewards those who are never satisfied, women, as commodified objects of a specific abstracted value—whether that value be her ties to class and money, or to her sexual appeal—were guaranteed to live at a net loss. In such a system, that of the feminine subject which exists outside of the narrowly defined limits of her objective worth to male desire must be repressed; this feminine surplus, Lacan’s “*plus de jouir*,” *feminine excess* or *jouissance*, goes unrecognized, unvalued, and, as such, cannot fully exist in the world. According to Wollstonecraft, capitalism, then, had exacerbated an unequal relation between men and women, locating without exception the former in the position of subject and the latter as object. This

conviction on them, ‘and to justify the ways of God to man.’ Why should I weep for myself?—‘Take, O world! thy much indebted tear!’” (103-4) Considering Imlay himself was involved in the slave trade before coming to England, this critique is a double edged sword.

distorted and damaged interrelationship was—and is—responsible for the widespread oppression and objectification of women, certainly, for Wollstonecraft, who repeatedly links Imlay’s “commercial face” and entrepreneurial urges with his “animal desire” and “sensations which lead [him] to follow an angle or a step”(CL, 339), “business and sensual pleasure” (CL, 327), it occasioned “most of the struggles of an eventful life” (160). Ultimately, it is through the intrasubjective relation with her reader that she strives to repair this relation between the feminine subject and the rest of the world, by seducing—with soul rather than body—the reader into recognizing her full subjectivity, into engaging with her on an equal footing and transcending the base urges upon which Capitalism capitalizes.

Encountering the Sublime Subject: Blueprint for an Aesthetics of the Heart

Wollstonecraft’s solution is a complicated one. Ultimately, the act of writing *Letters Written During a Short Residence* answers the very question it poses. Wollstonecraft critiques capitalism as a system which reduces men to desire in its most superficial forms—namely, for power—and reduces women to objects expected to fulfill that desire. Such a system necessitates the sublimation—even eradication—of those elements of one’s being which do not exist within the dictated limits, the surplus that in fact renders one unable to fulfill one’s narrowly defined social function. For women, this meant the greater sacrifice: that of their subjectivity.

Wollstonecraft, not satisfied with simply identifying the problem for her reader, proposes an alternative model of human interrelationships not limited by cultural constructions of gender, in which one’s net-worth is not determined by one’s ability to accumulate or to mimic abstract forms of wealth, but by one’s ability to access a deeper morality, by one’s capacity to *feel*.

Through her psychogeographic reading of the places and people she encounters in *Letters*, Wollstonecraft subtly proposes a system of sensibility-based morality, an aesthetics of the heart, by which the reader can take their own measure and engage with the world around

them—men and women—outside of the more restrictive cultural models. To this end, she harnesses the Romantic concept of *Imagination*. As Mary Favret explains it, she reveals “the break between imagination and commerce” and “construct[s] an economics of the imagination to rival that of capitalism” (119-20).¹⁵ In her original letters to Imlay, Wollstonecraft extensively discusses her theories on imagination, highlighting its role in love:

The common run of men, I know, with strong health and gross appetites, must have variety to banish ennui, because the imagination never lends its magic wand to convert appetite into love, cemented according reason.—Ah! My friend, you know not the ineffable delight, the exquisite pleasure, which arises from a unison of affection and desire, when the whole soul and senses are abandoned to a lively imagination, that renders every emotion delicate and rapturous. Yes; these are the emotions, over which satiety has no power, and the recollection of which, even disappointment cannot disenchant; but they do not exist without self-denial. These emotions, more or less strong, appear to me to be the distinctive characteristic of genius, the foundation of taste, and of that exquisite relish for the beauties of nature of which the common herd... certainly have no idea... I consider those minds as the most strong and original, whose imagination acts as the stimulus to their senses.

Well! you will ask, what is the result of all this reasoning? Why I cannot help thinking that it is possible for you, having gained great strength of mind, to return to nature, and regain a sanity of constitution, and purity of feeling—which would open your heart to me.—I would fain rest there! (CL, 297)

Her treatise on imagination and its potential role in the life of the individual, the terms of which are clearly drawn up in her personal letters, can found throughout her travelogue. Upon her first encounter with northerners, she identifies curiosity and imagination as that which elevates “brute” man to “lords of creation,” she writes: “I wondered that curiosity did not bring the beings who inhabited (the cottage) to the windows . . . I did not immediately recollect that men who remain so near the brute creation, as only to exert themselves to find the food necessary to sustain life, have little or no imagination to call forth the curiosity necessary to fructify the faint

¹⁵ See Mary Favret’s *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters*. (1993)

glimmerings of mind which entitles them to rank as lords of the creation” (10). Wollstonecraft further clarifies her distinction between higher and lower forms of existence, and the role of imagination in the “genius” of living: “The more I see of the world, the more I am convinced that civilization is a blessing not sufficiently estimated by those who have not traced its progress; for it not only refines our enjoyments, but produces a variety which enables us to retain the primitive delicacy of our sensations. Without the aid of the imagination all the pleasures of the senses must sink into grossness, unless continual novelty serve as a substitute for the imagination” (20).

Wollstonecraft identifies and values “civilization” not for its technological or economic advances, but its refinement of imagination, the cultural aesthetic advances which enable humans to “retain the primitive delicacy of our sensations,” the most potent forms of feeling of wild human nature, without succumbing to its baser instincts. In a characteristic twist, she suggests that, in fact, those who may think of themselves as the most civilized, who benefit from “progress” without critical self-reflection, will—without sufficient *imagination*—“sink into grossness,” living at the level of brute creation, if not on the surface, then at deeper strata of the soul. She focuses this analysis of human nature, honing in to the more effective—and affecting—individual scale by hinting to the reader that Imlay had sacrificed the relationship to the pursuit of sexual and economic novelty.

Her application of these ideas to her specific individual experience—that in which the reader is fully invested—gets even more pointed. Upon joking with her “unnamed you,” saying of her daughter “I never saw a calf bounding in a meadow, that did not remind me of my little frolicker, A calf, you say. Yes; but a capital one, I own,” she cannot write composedly, “sinking

into reveries—my heart flutters, I know not why. Fool! It is time thou wert at rest” (110).¹⁶ The reader watches her viewing invisible memories in her minds’ eye, memories of the same tenor as that imagined exchange we just witnessed, experiencing present pain in equal measure to past joy. Wanting to silence her heart reveals to the reader her need for peace, at the same time as it signals the suicidal extent of her pain. Immediately following, she writes:

Friendship and domestic happiness are continually praised; yet how little is there of either in the world, because it requires more cultivation of mind to keep awake affection, even in our own hearts, than the common run of people suppose. Besides, few like to be seen as they really are; and a degree of simplicity, and of undisguised confidence, which to uninterested observers, would almost border on weakness, is the charm, nay the essence of love or friendship” all the bewitching graces of childhood again appearing... The zest of novelty is, however, necessary to rouse the languid sympathies which have been hacknied in the world; as is the factitious behavior, falsely termed good-breeding, to amuse those who defective in taste, continually rely for pleasure on their animal spirits, which not being maintained by the imagination, are unavoidably sooner exhausted than the sentiments of the heart. Friendship is, in general sincere at the commencement, and lasts whilst there is any thing to support it; but as a mixture of novelty and vanity is the usual prop, no wonder if it fall with the slender stay.... Why am I talking of friendship, after which I have had such a wildgoose chase.—I thought only of telling you that the crows, as well as the wild-geese, are here birds of passage. (110)

The searing and direct critique of Imlay culminates in the last line of this letter: she admits her wild-goose chase has been after an imaginary being, and she suggests that Imlay, too, is mistaken, if he supposes himself a “wild” migratory bird on a noble search for freedom; instead she likens him to the less-favorable “crow” forever in pursuit of shiny new objects. Using her own real-life example, she illustrates the necessity of *imagination* to elevate lust to love, to enable men to rise above their “animal spirits” to become “lords of creation”,¹⁷ to transcend

¹⁶ This is also a reference to *Hamlet*, to a battle of wits between Hamlet and his betrayers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who he ultimately sends to their deaths through—what else—a letter.

¹⁷ Creation defined, rather than in a strictly religious sense, as the imaginative act of constructing the world around oneself—a psychogeographic relation to place.

perpetual quest for novelty in order to engage the “sentiments of the heart” at the deepest level; she links the profundity of imagination with one’s moral—and human—capacity. By depositing this critique within the individual, by applying it directly to her own life, she enables the reader to understand the link between imagination and morality at the most personal level. She situates this imagination-based moral capacity in direct opposition to capitalism: “Who would labour for wealth, if it were to procure nothing but conveniences? If we wish to render mankind moral from principle, we must, I am persuaded, give a greater scope to the enjoyments of the senses by blending taste with them” (126). If capitalism is linked to the pleasures of the senses in the shallowest forms, then Wollstonecraft is arguing not against pleasure itself, but for a deepening of one’s capacity to experience pleasure into a receptivity for joy, through imagination. In doing so, she creates a model for morality that is based on an aesthetics of the heart and a currency of sensibility, with the potential to replace the capitalist-cogwork of human principles her society appears to operate under.

Wollstonecraft explains her proposal for a new concept of imagination and sensibility-based morality to counteract capitalism and free the feminine subject, but she doesn’t stop there. She puts it into practice. In writing *Letters*, she constructs a subject for her readers that functions under the aegis of these deeper principles; she shapes an intrasubjective relationship between the narrator and her imagined reader which fundamentally defies the restrictive gendered relations dictated by capitalism, and, in doing so, she raises the reader—and herself—up to her own moral expectation. To accomplish this, she uses Romantic tropes to perform a psychogeographic reading of the Scandinavian landscape that communicates to readers—in a shared language of sensibility and imagination, an aesthetics of the heart—the unsounded, the immeasurable depths of her own interiority. It is through the expression of a subjectivity which transcends social

limitations and defies quantification, that she draws the reader into a mutual intrasubjective relation; the reader on whom she projected her ideal Other, allowing her to become a full subject, has now entered into an equal partnership with the author, a Romantic relationship in which their imaginary friend, Mary Wollstonecraft *in text*, has been assigned the role of their internal ideal Other. Just as Wollstonecraft says, in a Sublime moment gazing up at a starry night, “my soul rose to its author,” (51), so too does the soul of the reader rise up to meet her. Having entered into this relationship, the reader—in recognizing Wollstonecraft—must acknowledge and expand their own inner horizon, engaging with her sensibility-based code of moral beauty. Literature and art, in its highest form, asks this of its reader, yet as an autobiographical work, *Letters* asks the question more insistently. The travelogue becomes a window through which a living being can, defying barriers of time and space, enter into direct conversation with the reader, establishing a relationship that is intimately personal and potentially more affecting. *Letters* requires the reader to position his or her internal literary journey within their own life-context, mapping their newly expanded network of aesthetic sensibilities upon the world around them.

To counteract the quantifying and restrictive forces of an Enlightenment culture commandeered by capitalism, Wollstonecraft harnesses the most powerful aesthetic principle that existed in her world: the Sublime. Originating with Longinus in the First Century AD, who defined it as that which is great, elevated, or lofty in thought or language, particularly in a rhetorical context, this trope was adopted and renovated by eighteenth-century culture, and applied to the interrelation between man and nature. Burke famously defined the concept in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), suggesting that raw or wild—ugly—landscapes possessed an aesthetic quality, eliciting in the viewer a “negative pain,” a pleasure produced by the psychological and physiological effects of

fear and attraction. In encountering a terror-inducing landscape—a great height, a rocky coastline, a “boundless waste of water” (103)—one is reminded of one’s own mortality; the illusion of danger momentarily sharpening our awareness of our own inevitable death even while offering us the relief of immediate sanctuary. The result is a thrilling consciousness of our own tenuous and beautiful position in time and space, a noumenal-phenomenal collapse, the landscape reflecting back to us our own dizzying depths. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant further clarifies his own ideas on the Sublime, suggesting that while the Beautiful is “connected with the form of the object” and therefore bounded, the Sublime “is to be found in a formless object,” represented by a “boundlessness” (23). Ironically, he suggests that the Sublime exceeds one’s capacity for sensibility and imagination—thus producing the felt experience of encountering one’s own limitlessness—and can only be understood through reason. He writes:

Sublime is the name give to what is *absolutely great*. But to be great and to be a magnitude are entirely different concepts (*magnitudo* and *quantitas*). In the same way to *assert without qualification (simpliciter)* that something is great, is quite a different thing from saying that it is *absolutely great (absolute, non comparative magnum)*. The latter is *what is beyond all comparison great*.— What, then, is the meaning of the assertion that anything is great, or small, or of medium size? What is indicated is not a pure concept of understanding, still less an intuition of sense; and just as little is it a concept of reason, for it does not import any principle of cognition. It must, therefore, be a concept of judgement, or have its source in one, and must introduce as basis of the judgement a subjective finality of the representation with reference to the power of judgement. (94-95)

Here we readily see that nothing can be given in nature, no matter how great we may judge it to be, which, regarded in some other relation, may not be degraded to the level of the infinitely little, and nothing so small which in comparison with some still smaller standard may not for our imagination be enlarged to the greatness of a world. Telescopes have put within our reach an abundance of material to go upon in making the first observation, and microscopes the same in making the second. Nothing, therefore, which can be an object of the senses is to be termed sublime when treated on this footing. (97)

For Kant, the “greatness” of Sublime has no direct spatial correlation despite its link to physical forms of nature; it transcends phenomenal classification. Tellingly, he uses the tools of the Enlightenment—microscope and telescope—to break down traditional barriers of classification, demonstrating the role of the viewer and her or her specific perspective in even the most straightforward forms of measurement. Kant’s reasoning trumps the reason; he uses the apparatus of logic itself to break Enlightenment law. Sublime is that which is immeasurable; it transcends “pure concept to of understanding,” “intuition of sense,” and “reason.” It is in the interrelation—the conceptual space—between sensibility, imagination, and intellect that the Sublime exists:

...the sublime is not to be looked for in the things of nature, but only in our own ideas. Consequently it is the disposition of soul evoked by a particular representation engaging the attention of the reflective judgement, and not the Object, that is to be called sublime. The foregoing formulae defining the sublime may, therefore, be supplemented by yet another: *The sublime is that, the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense.* (98)

The Sublime, then, is that in the human mind which transcends every standard of sense, which breaks all bounds, which defies measurement, calculation, and limitation. It is the feeling which “comes to him of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting the idea of *a whole within* which that imagination attains its maximum, and, in its fruitless efforts to extend this limit; recoils upon itself, but in so doing succumbs to an emotional delight” (99-100) [*my ital*]. The Sublime, then, is the imagination attempting to gauge its own depths and thrilling in its magnificent failure. To this end, nature, Kant argues, cannot itself be Sublime—as it “does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind” (114)—yet it serves as an edifice against which our own echoes collide and return to us, amplifying our own meager attempts at self-expression to a degree that matches more closely our inward experience. Thus, I contend, the experience of the Sublime is neither expressly exterior, nor is a solely interior one; its

topography is psychogeographic in nature. The Sublime takes place through our experience of an externalization—a spatialization—of an inward process, a simultaneous dual mapping of one’s internal and external worlds.

It is no coincidence, that Kant conveys his conception of the Sublime through a description of a subject’s encounter with ruins of the Great Egyptian Pyramids and St. Peter’s Cathedral in the ancient ruined city of Rome. *Ruins*, the death and decay of physical objects, resonate with internal impulses that concurrently draw us toward and drive us away from mortality. They are a reminder of the phenomenal contract which binds our own being, the temporal and spatial (i.e., measurable) parameters of our own body that contains—both limits and makes possible—the expression of the infinite interiority. In the expression of one’s subjectivity, the horizon line of an endless, immeasurable interior extends toward one of two vanishing points: death or transcendence.¹⁸ For Wollstonecraft, who sought to reassert feminine subjectivity in terms un-quantifiable, unlimited, and therefore un-commodifiable, the Sublime became the vehicle through which this possibility could be expressed.

When most young men in Europe are making their pilgrimage to the ruins of Roman churches and Egyptian monuments, Wollstonecraft has gone north into the Bastille of nature—the elemental ruins of the earth that reach beyond culture and its fallible structures; an expanded space with revolutionary potential: she writes: “approaching the frontiers, consequently the sea, nature resumed an aspect ruder and ruder, or rather seemed the bones of the world waiting to be clothed with every thing necessary to give life and beauty. Still it was sublime”(42). The elemental ruins she encounters on her journey mirror the extent of her interior injury, as well as

¹⁸ Infinite space possesses a horizon line defined, not by its own perimeter, but by the limitation of the viewer’s gaze and specific angle of his or her perspective.

her view of society, revealing an internal skeletal structure bared for analysis. In these descriptions of the Scandinavian coastline we find embedded sentiments more directly expressed in her original letters: “I see here nothing but heaps of ruins, and only converse with people in trade and sensuality. I am weary of travelling—yet seem to have no home—no resting place to look to. I.—I am strangely cast off” (CL, 320). The link here between capitalism and the ruin of human character is obvious. The wreckage of her psyche manifests more subtly, in the grammatical ruins of her sentence structure, contained in the space of the unspoken *em dash*. It reemerges in the wasteland of *Letters*: burned cities, burned palaces, burned forests. Decimated bodies. Upon touring a deserted palace in Rosenbourg, she writes: “The vacuum left by departed greatness...dismissed pageantry in search of pleasure...it seemed a vast tomb, full of the shadowy phantoms of those who had played or toiled their hour out...celebrated the conquests of love or war. Could they be no more—to whom my imagination thus gave life? Could the thoughts of which there remained so many vestiges, have vanished quite away? And these beings, composed of such noble materials of thinking and feeling, have they only melted into the elements to keep in motion the grand mass of life?”(165) Wollstonecraft takes up Enlightenment language—*materials, elements, mass*—and adapts it to Romantic purposes; formulating her inquiry into the souls of the departed revelers in scientific terms, she explores the relation between the finite architecture of Estate and body and the immeasurable interior of human life. Her critique of capitalism resonates in the comparative disparity between the former materialistic pleasurable pursuits of the revelers and their mortality, echoing in Wollstonecraft’s perception of the empty rooms, amplified by memory. At the same time, she reminds us of her intimate psychogeographic experience of the space-memory: “the silence of spacious apartments always makes itself to be felt; I at least feel it; and I listen for the sound of my footsteps, as I have done

at midnight to the ticking of the death-watch.” The psycho-spatial experience of mortality is itself Sublime.

Wollstonecraft ultimately encounters the ruins—not of architecture or of nature—but of the human body itself. Upon entering a tomb, she writes:

A desire of preserving the body seems to have prevailed in most countries of the world, futile as it is to term it a preservation, when the noblest parts are immediately sacrificed merely to save the muscles, skin, and bone from rottenness. When I was shown these human putrefactions, I shrunk back with disgust and horror “Ashes to ashes!” . . . if this be not dissolution, it is something worse than natural decay. It is treason against humanity, thus to lift up the awful veil which would fain hide its weakness. The grandeur of the active principle is never more strongly felt than at such a sight; for nothing is so ugly as the human form when deprived of life, and thus dried into stone, merely to preserve the most disgusting image of death. The contemplation of noble ruins produced a melancholy that exalts the mind.—We take retrospect of the exertion of man, the fate of empires and their rulers, marking the grand destruction of ages, it seems the necessary change of time leading to improvement.—Our very soul expands, and we forget our littleness; how painfully brought to our recollection by such vain attempts to snatch from decay what is destined so soon to perish. Life, what art thou? Where goes this breath? This I, so much alive? In what will it mix, giving or receiving fresh energy?—What will break the enchantment of animation?—For worlds, I would not see a form I loved—embalmed in my heart—thus sacrilegiously handled!—Pugh! My stomach turns—Is this all the distinction of the rich in the grave?—They had better quietly allow the scythe of equality to mow them down with the common mass, than struggle to become a monument of the instability of human greatness. (71-2)

“Human putrefactions”—“muscles, skin, bone”; the “teeth, the skin, the nails”—denied natural decay, become objects of ruin instead of rot, every bit as lifeless as “cabinets full of baubles, and gems, and swords,” objects that exist in a “vacuum of departed greatness.” There is a key difference, however. Ruins of stone and landscape come to life in the mind of the viewer. In the ruins of the human body, the Sublime is extinguished; death exists without transcendence.

Yet, if Wollstonecraft seeks to articulate to the reader the immeasurability of her own subjectivity, using the Sublime to do so, and if the horizon of our interior topography extends infinitely between two points, death or transcendence, then her fascination with ruins and with

“death-like idea[s]” is not merely a natural result of a suicidal depression, a drive toward death; rather, she takes up mortality—in life and philosophy—as a fixed counterpoint to navigate by. She harnesses death in living metaphor—in the Sublime experience—to achieve transcendence through her relation with the reader.¹⁹ She establishes the horizon-line of her interior topography using mortality as a living metaphor. As a pregnant woman rows her across a channel,²⁰

“amongst the rocks,” she asks:

without hope what is to sustain life, but the fear of annihilation—the only thing which I have ever felt a dread-I cannot bear to think of being no more—of losing myself—though existence is often but a painful consciousness of misery; nay it appears to me impossible that I should cease to exist, or that this active restless spirit, equally alive to joy and sorrow, should only be organized dust—ready to fly abroad the moment the spring snaps, or the spark goes out, which kept it together. Sure something resides in this heart that is not perishable—and life is more than a dream. (76)

This passage, in which she communicates unmistakable fear of death, contains echoes an earlier one, in which she hints at her consideration of suicide. While watching her daughter sleep, she writes:

contemplating all nature at rest... what is this active principle which keeps me awake? . . . How frequently has melancholy and even misanthropy taken possession of me, when the world has disgusted me, and friends have proved unkind. I have considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind; —I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself—not, perhaps for the reflection has been carried very far, by snapping the thread of an existence which loses its charms in proportion as the cruel experience of life stops or poisons the current of the heart. Futurity, what has though not to give to those who know that there is such a thing as happiness! I

¹⁹ She further indicates the mutual exclusion of Capitalism and the Sublime; upon smelling glue from a nearby factory, she writes: “the din of trade drags me back to all the care I left behind, when lost in sublime emotions. Rocks aspiring towards the heavens, and, as it were, shutting out sorrow, surrounded me, whilst peace appeared to steal along the lake to calm by bosom, modulating the wind that agitated... now I hear only an account of the tricks of trade or listen to the distressful tale of some victim of ambition” (192).

²⁰ This image is infused with life—literally and figuratively; through her psychogeographic encounter with the pregnant, vigorous, and capable woman, she shapes the reader’s perception of the fearless feminine subject.

speak not of philosophical contentment, though pain has afforded them the strongest conviction of it. (16-17)

One must, again, note the Enlightenment language, the scientific terms she uses to try to master death—and her own emotions: *organized dust, spring snaps, spark goes out, active principle, particle broken off, grand mass of mankind, attraction of adhesion, snap the thread, current of the heart*. The language of the science of her day is unmistakable, yet each phrase is applied—rather than to the measurement of physical phenomena—to the intangible *felt* experience of an immeasurable interior. By shifting the context of these terms, Wollstonecraft merges emotion and intellect, demonstrating a kind of feeling-thinking, the theoretical answer to the question of her time—and her life—put into practice; she offers a model for her reader to more perfectly merge their Enlightenment-Romantic impulses and consider the noumenal-phenomenal exchange—the external world as it translates in our internal perceptions and the interior world of the human psyche as it can be expressed externally—from a more expansive perspective. Furthermore, while she does not directly reference the Romantic term, her ruminations on death throughout the text may be linked to the Sublime by virtue of the intensity with which she experiences them, their link to her experience of external forms of nature which foster an internal extreme state—and an awareness of the immeasurable, the dizzying inexpressible depths of interiority. It further meets the requirement of the Sublime by her experience—in relative safety—of the immediate possibility her own mortality, not due to an outside threat of nature but rather an internal one. To compound this, the language she uses in these key scenes culminates in a later scene in which the Sublime is directly referenced. Before we may effectively examine the this scene, however, we must take a moment to understand that what she does in these Sublime ruminations on death is to construct for the reader the ruinous state of her own psyche. The ruins the reader encounters, exist within Wollstonecraft herself.

Nature is the nurse of sentiment—the true source of taste;—yet what misery, as well as rapture, is produced by a quick perception of the beautiful and the sublime, when it is exercised in observing animated nature, when every beautiful feeling and emotion excites responsive sympathy, and the harmonized soul sinks into melancholy, or rises to ecstasy, just as the chords are touched, like the Aeolian harp agitated by the changing wind. But how dangerous is it to foster these sentiments in such an imperfect state of existence; and how difficult to eradicate them when an affection for mankind, a passion for an individual, is but the unfolding of that love which embraces all that is great and beautiful.

When a warm heart has received strong impressions, they are not to be effaced. Emotions become sentiments and the imagination renders even transient sensations permanent, by fondly retracing them. I cannot, without a thrill of delight, recollect views I have seen, which are not to be forgotten,—nor looks I have felt in every nerve which I shall never more meet. The grave has closed over a dear friend[...] still she is present with me, and I hear her soft voice warbling as I stray over the heath. Fate has separated me from another, the fire of whose eyes, tempered by infantine tenderness, still warms my breast; even when gazing on these tremendous cliffs, sublime emotions absorb my soul. And, smile not, if I add, that the rosy tint of morning reminds me of a suffusion, which will never more charm my senses, unless it reappears on the cheeks of my child. Her sweet blushes I may yet hide in my bosom, and she is still too young to ask why starts the tear, so near akin to pleasure and pain? (58-59)

Wollstonecraft exists in a state of negative-pain. The architecture of her memory does not crumble, the internal skeleton structure, the imprint of her relationship with Imlay does not atrophy. The ruins of her history, contained within her “warm heart” are all fire, and misery, and rapture. For Wollstonecraft, in the “imperfect state of existence” fostered by the noumenal-phenomenal contract, an “affection for mankind” and a “passion for an individual” have the same origin; the personal mirrors the universal as she links her experience of the Sublime in nature to her most intimate experiences of love. The tremendous cliffs, the “rosy tint of morning” and the remembered body of her former lover are as inseparable as pleasure and pain. In linking the universal with the personal, in defining that individual relationship as “but an unfolding of that love which embraces all that is great and beautiful,” in connecting “great”²¹ and “beautiful,”

²¹ I am convinced that here, she is not referring to “great” in terms of spatiality, but to Kant’s definition.

she embodies for the reader her conception of an imagination-based aesthetics of the heart.

Witness to a crumbling cathedral of memory, to the great relics of man/Man that lay waste her interior landscape, Wollstonecraft blazes brighter, encountering the Sublime. “Know you of what material some hearts are made?” she asks Imlay and reader; her internal structure is made of that which will not collapse. And in the ruins of Mary Wollstonecraft herself, the reader encounters the Sublime.

If the horizon line of Wollstonecraft’s interior stretches between two distinct vanishing points, death and transcendence, her Sublime encounter with—and triumph over—death is profoundly significant. Weeks after her second suicide attempt, at a specific point in time and space, Wollstonecraft sits on the rocky outcroppings of a Scandinavian cliff, and writes the words: “I am not well, and yet you see I cannot die” (CL, 207). This in a letter for Imlay’s eyes alone; when she revises for the reader—who does not already share her view of the ruins of their relationship—she must clarify, using a collective store of cultural memory, Romantic images of nature. Instead, she presents the reader with her encounter with the Cascade near Christiana. As she hikes up to the falls, she reveals her internal state to the reader: “My imagination has never yet severed me from my griefs—and my mind has seldom been so free as to allow my body to be delicate. How I am altered by disappointment!—When going to Lisbon, the elasticity of my mind was sufficient to ward off weariness, and my imagination still could dip her brush in the rainbow of fancy, and sketch futurity in glowing colours. Now—but let me talk of something else—will you go with me to the cascade?” (131) The road echoes her interior journey; it is “rugged and dreary,” rocks are “entirely bare” due to a forest fire that had ravaged the landscape some years before; “this appearance of desolation was beyond measure gloomy,” “the devastation must, indeed, be terrible, when this, literally speaking, wild fire, runs along the

forest, flying from top to top, and crackling amongst the branches. The soil, as well as the trees, is swept away by the destructive torrent; and the country, despoiled of beauty and riches, is left to mourn for ages.” As she “looks with pain on the ridge of rocks that stretched far beyond my eye, formerly crowned with the most beautiful verdure,” one imagines her looking at the desolate, razed horizon of her own psyche. But in the presence of destruction, of the searing pain that accompanies it, she finds herself

unequal to the task of conveying an idea of the beauty and elegance of the scene when the spiral tops of the pines are loaded with ripening seed, and the sun gives a glow to their light green tinge, which his changing into purples...in every crevice, some sapling struggling for existence...roots torn up by the storms, become a shelter for a young generation. The pine and fir woods . . . paths not entangled with fallen leaves, which are only interesting whilst they are fluttering between life and death. The grey cobweb-like appearance of the aged pines...a much finer image of decay, the fibres whitening as they lose their moisture, imprisoned life seems to be stealing away. I cannot tell why—but death, under every form, appears to me like something getting free—to expand in I know not what element; nay I feel that this conscious being must be as unfettered, have the wings of thought before it can be happy. (131-2)

The psychogeographic imagery here, my reader will by now detect. The explosive, vibrant death of leaves, the slow decay of pine, death under every form “like something getting free.”²²

Wollstonecraft imparts her suspicion in a whisper—“I feel that this conscious being must be as unfettered, have the wings of thought before it can be happy.” Yet lest we detect the suicidal threat and halt there, we must decipher the more complicated underlying hint the qualifying image contains: “have the wings of thought.” Certainly, she yearns to shed the phenomenal form that inhibits her, yet I contend that, by reference to thought, to imagination, this image is one of *transcendence*, of death as metaphor.

Her encounter at the cascade expands this hint into a Sublime image of transcendence:

²² Wollstonecraft’s capacity for empathy is startling; she mourns for trees and people, as deeply as she does herself. I believe, for Wollstonecraft, it is same.

Reaching the cascade, or rather cataract, the roaring of which had a long time announced its vicinity, my soul was hurried by the falls into a new train of reflections. The impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent from the dark cavities which mocked the exploring eye, produced an equal activity in my mind: my thoughts darted from earth to heaven, and I asked myself why I was chained to life and its misery? Still the tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited, were pleasurable; and, viewing it, my soul rose, with renewed dignity, above its cares—grasping at immortality—it seemed as impossible to stop the current of my thoughts, as of the always varying, still the same, torrent before me—I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come. (132-33)

In this Sublime encounter, Wollstonecraft and Cascade become one. The current, no longer a double entendre, but a single entity roaring in the heart of the landscape, the reader, and Wollstonecraft. The boundaries of the phenomenal world dissolve in language; “Bounding over the dark speck of life to come,” Wollstonecraft stretches her hand to eternity, across the interior topography of her own soul, exteriorized for the reader toward the infinite horizon, reaching from death to transcendence. The psychic ruins of death and decay are transformed into negative pain, into intense, incalculable beauty. The reader no longer views a cascade; they encounter *Mary Wollstonecraft*—the Sublime Subject.

Herein lies Wollstonecraft’s great calculation. She constructs the reader’s journey, with Romantic tropes, through the landscape and into the endless reaches of her own interior topography. The reader encounters, in her, a Sublime subjectivity, immeasurable, uncontainable. When Wollstonecraft arrives in Copenhagen, nearing the end of her journey, to the news that Imlay will not be meeting her, she wanders the incinerated city, treading over the “live ashes” of her own heart. It is a wasteland of infinite pain, the flash fire revealing the charred cultural and personal framework, “the bones of the world”; the worst of humanity; the savagery of masses; the betrayal of an individual. She wanders, mourning with the ghost of Matilda, seeking blindly for an imaginary friend, an invisible you with whom to share her pain, expanding her individual grief to encompass nations. She speaks of imaginary plots and prime ministers accused of

“wishing to set the world on fire”; innocent men sacrificed, blood spilled, and the live ashes of an incinerated city underneath her feet. She writes to Imlay and the reader: “After a long journey, with our eyes directed to some particular spot, to arrive and find nothing as it should be, is vexatious, and sinks the agitated spirits. But I, who received the cruelest of disappointments, last spring, in returning to my home, term such as these emphatically passing cares. Know you of what material some hearts are made?” (184)

By the time she arrives at Hamburg, there is no Imlay; yet there is an “unnamed you” who, defying time and space, finds themselves at the same place, walking to meet her. Let us return to “L’ame, L’Ame, L’Ame —having encountered a Sublime Soul, the reader—as with an encounter of any external form of the Sublime—recognizes that which resounds within us; our depths are newly illuminated; through the horizon-line of language we transcend the phenomenal contract—sound, sight, word unable to contain, to measure the reaches of our interiority, yet in their failure, allow us to recognize the infinite in the Other which mirrors that in ourselves. Wollstonecraft reaches out over the “dark speck of life to come” to her reader—to generations of readers hundreds of years hence. Using her aesthetics of the heart, Wollstonecraft constructs a feminine subject for her readership which transcends cultural limitations, which breaks down barriers of traditional notions of femininity; she engages the reader in an equal partnership, asking them to transcend the limitations of their time. She seduces them with a Sublime subjectivity; a thinking-feeling subject, infinite, incalculable. By the end of *Letters*, the reader seeks to meet her—not only for her, but for themselves. Having encountered the Sublime reaches of our own soul through a relation with our imaginary Other, we wish to be recognized in the world, to *exist*.

Her final message to her readers:

An ardent affection for the human race makes enthusiastic characters eager to produce alteration in laws and governments prematurely. To render them useful and permanent, they must be the growth of *each particular soil*, and the gradual fruit of the ripening understanding of the nation, matured by time, not forced by unnatural fermentation. And to convince me that such a change is gaining ground, with accelerating pace, the view I have had of society during my northern journey, would have been sufficient, had I not previously considered the grand causes which combine to carry mankind forward, and diminish the sum of human misery. (198)
[*my ital*]

In sparking a revolution in the heart of *each particular reader*, it is Mary Wollstonecraft who may be accused of wishing to set the world on fire.

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