

Love's Skirmishes and the Triumph of Ideology

IN ADDITION TO UPENDING the social order of one of the most esteemed nations in Europe, the French Revolution exploded many political theories; it even caused some philosophers to wonder whether there was *any* discernible connection between ideas and real events. Mary Wollstonecraft was no exception. Having journeyed alone to France to escape the torments of her passion for Fuseli, she watched a very dignified king of France ushered under guard through the streets of Paris. For the first time in her life she found herself unable to sleep without a lighted candle, and her ideals of human perfectibility fell beneath the blade of the guillotine. It was also in Paris, and in the wake of Fuseli's rejection, that Wollstonecraft buried her theories about "respectful esteem." Talk about sexuality was more explicit in revolutionary Paris, divorce laws had been made more liberal there,¹ and in this atmosphere Wollstonecraft discovered for herself that the vulnerability she had feared was largely offset by the "substantial happiness" sexuality seemed to offer. With Gilbert Imlay, the American entrepreneur, she experienced for the first time the depths of a passionate, reciprocal exchange of love (a "suffusion," she fondly describes the physical signs of Imlay's passion), and, as a consequence, she began to reconsider the role of intense feeling in improving the human soul. Even Milton was redeemed in the course of her unself-conscious capitulation to sexual love. "I like to see your eyes praise me," she wrote to Imlay, "and, Milton insinuates, that, during such recitals, there are interruptions, not ungrateful to the heart, when the honey that drops from the lips is not merely words" (*MWL*, p. 235; mid-1793).

Wollstonecraft's happiness was not long-lived, however. After their child was born, Imlay's attentions flagged, and he became more distracted by business and more interested in emotional and sexual variety than in Wollstonecraft's passionate demands. But even as his absences lengthened and Wollstonecraft succumbed to agonies of doubt, frustration, and disappointment, she refused to renounce the

new self-image that had bloomed with this brief love. To complement her characteristic determination ("I do not chuse to be a secondary object," she wrote Imlay, echoing her adolescent demand to Jane Arden [*MWL*, p. 275; 9 January 1795]), she developed from this relationship not only a new acceptance of her own emotionalism but also a new openness to emotional dependence and a resolution not to rest content with theories that denied felt desires of body or heart. Having experienced and acknowledged the complexities of her female self, Wollstonecraft suffered the pain her theories of reason had been designed to defend against. But in the course of her suffering she also began to discover new reservoirs of internal strength, resources that enabled her to express this complex being more fully than ever before, in a voice newly responsive to herself and to the world at large.

*Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden,
Norway, and Denmark*

Mary Wollstonecraft began her *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) in order to win financial independence from her lover-turned-employer, Gilbert Imlay. Perceiving Imlay's growing discontent, yet refusing to admit an irrevocable change, Wollstonecraft seems to have imagined that the businessman Imlay would feel less burdened if his unanticipated family were financially self-supporting. The epistolary travelogue she produced did not have the effect of reclaiming Imlay's affection, but it accomplished a great deal for Wollstonecraft. William Godwin, for example, who was unmoved by the "harshness and ruggedness" of the *Rights of Woman*, found in the *Letters* "genius" and "gentleness." "If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author," he wrote, "this appears to me the book."² And Godwin's friend Amelia Alderson (who was later to remark that of all new sights only Wollstonecraft and the Cumberland Lakes did not disappoint her) was equally pleased with the softer tone of Wollstonecraft's latest work. "As soon as I read your Letters from Norway, the cold awe which the philosopher had excited was lost in the tender sympathy call'd forth by the woman."³

Godwin and Alderson were responding to the direct, unabashedly autobiographical voice that resounds from the first page of this very personal travelogue. Wollstonecraft openly appeals here to her reader's emotions because for the first time she openly acknowledges the primacy of her own feelings and the power of those feelings to engage and persuade. Immediately, the persona, who is, explicitly, "Mary"—Wollstonecraft herself—grants subjectivity and personal experiences

the authority she had previously reserved for the objective “clear truths” of reason.

In writing these desultory letters, I found I could not avoid being continually the first person—“the little hero of each tale.” I tried to correct this fault, if it be one . . . but in proportion as I arranged my thoughts, my letter, I found, became stiff and affected: I, therefore, determined to let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained, as I perceived that I could not give a just description of what I saw, but by relating the effect different objects had produced on my mind and feelings, whilst the impression was still fresh.⁴

This passage announces both the form and the content of Wollstonecraft’s new aesthetic program. “Desultory” is no longer a pejorative term, as it was when she accused Burke of being a “desultory writer” in *The Rights of Men*.⁵ Instead, Wollstonecraft is frankly acknowledging the associative organization all her works have employed; but here she is granting it a value she had previously denied. To “arrange” thoughts logically is to sever them from the person who conceives them; thus it is to murder thought, to substitute “stiff,” “affected artifice” for vital personality. Wollstonecraft decides to “let [her] remarks and reflections flow unrestrained”—to construct her narrative, that is, according to the associations of her own mind—because she now believes that accuracy is measured by the subject’s unfolding response rather than by some fixed, objective standard. Her own feelings also make up the content of her work because she now considers these feelings an integral part of the truths she would convey.

Wollstonecraft’s endorsement of feeling here reveals a wholehearted immersion in life that is the direct antithesis of her adolescent religious renunciation. As her narrative progresses, she indicates that, in an almost Keatsian way, she now embraces even the intensity of sorrow as essentially life-affirming: “emotions that trembled on the brink of extacy and agony gave a poignancy to my sensations, which made me feel more alive than usual” (p. 16). Every exuberance of emotion she now sees as the expression of a “purified” heart; and accepting her emotionalism signals her freedom from the warfare against self that masculine authorities dictated. “For years I have endeavoured to calm an impetuous tide,” Wollstonecraft comments on her years of repression, “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” (p. 74).

Wollstonecraft advances her brave new vulnerability with an authorial confidence her earlier works never achieved. The frequency of such phrases as “in my opinion,” “I am persuaded that,” “It seems to me,” and “I believe” suggests that she is anxious to take personal

responsibility for her speculations instead of grounding them in an objective authority. And whereas her personal involvement was deliberately understated or altogether omitted in her earlier works, here her repeated references to autobiographical experiences ("Much of this I have seen," "I have frequently . . . heard") indicate the ease with which she now embraces the role of an authoritative commentator.

Wollstonecraft's new self-confidence is largely due to the relationship she now emphasizes between herself as a particular subject and humanity in general. As early as 1790, in *The Rights of Men*, she had implied that the development of the individual recapitulated that of civilization, but not until the *Letters* does she make use of this connection to justify self-consciousness and self-expression. Although Wollstonecraft claims that her "favourite subject of contemplation" is "the future improvement of the world" (p. 182), she concentrates instead on the present improvement of a single individual—herself. But while the focus of the travelogue may seem to split in two at the juncture of self-expression and social observation, Wollstonecraft's perceptions actually illuminate the twin phenomena of the individual *and* society. By narrating the progress of her own expanding consciousness, she forecasts the course of social improvement. For, she argues, each nation, like an individual, has a collective "understanding" that evolves organically, "ripening" gradually to fruition (p. 198). Thus what might look like egotism becomes a strategy of instruction and provides a plot for historical narrative as well.

Wollstonecraft significantly alters her earlier assessment of the relative roles of reason and imagination in this model of social and individual maturation. Perhaps because she no longer dreads the vulnerability attendant on feeling, she no longer argues for a defensive self-control that requires the imagination to be shackled to the warden, reason. Instead, in the *Letters*, reason and the imagination play equally important roles in educating the individual. Reason, or "understanding," "enlarge[s] the soul" and gives intimations of personal creative power. Feeling or passion is the individual's (or the infant civilization's) first and most primitive response, but only through the combined actions of reasonable reflection and imaginative projection can this instinctive behavior be refined into a mature, sensitive response. This model of maturation is implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—the subject of Wollstonecraft's meditations in the *Letters*. At the same time, the actions of reason and the imagination provide the organizational principle for each significant episode. Wollstonecraft's initial response to each new situation or natural scene is a spontaneous emotion, but only as she reflects rationally on the scene is this emotion generalized to humanity; by the same token, only as she imaginatively projects herself into the scene does she intuit the power that assures her of her own integrity and worth.

In the *Letters* Wollstonecraft no longer conceives of reason as a Lockean, essentially passive, receiver of objective “clear truths.” Rather, she now defines reason’s primary function as reflection—not the reflection a mirror might yield but the mediation of an active agent. Reason is an inward-turning faculty that allows the individual to examine his or her own prejudices (p. 31) and to empathize with others as a consequence of heightened self-knowledge. Reason is no longer presented as a superior faculty; it neither can nor should control feeling (pp. 94, 109). Indeed, reason often gives way to emotions or even generates them by reflecting on and cultivating inner potential. Wollstonecraft is able to admire a stately pine tree, for example, even though it departs from canonical aesthetic principles, because

my very reason obliges me to permit my feelings to be my criterion. Whatever excites emotion has charms for me; though I insist that the cultivation of the mind, by warming, nay almost creating the imagination, produces taste, and an immense variety of sensations and emotions, partaking of the exquisite pleasure inspired by beauty and sublimity. [P. 92]

The imagination is also a faculty that discovers and develops individual potential, but, because its primary impulse is outward, its activity is more dynamic. The imagination, activated by a sensed disproportion between the natural world and the individual’s desire, projects thought beyond the confines of the temporal world. The imaginative experience is often provoked by a feeling of temporary confinement or by a reminder of the soul’s more prolonged imprisonment in the flesh; Wollstonecraft contemplates a collection of coffins, for example, and is inspired to a vision of the endless procession of humanity (p. 71). Because the imaginative experience originates in intimations of loss, the imaginative leap frequently carries overtones of sadness even into reveries of infinity or freedom. But the action of the imagination is essentially life-affirming, for it simultaneously proves the creative power of the individual and anchors the subject in the external world. Thus when Wollstonecraft speaks of “that tender melancholy which, sublimating the imagination, exalts, rather than depresses the mind” (p. 51), she is invoking the etymology of the word “sublimate”: *sublimare*, “to take across a threshold.” “Tender melancholy,” the intimation of mortality, exalts the mind by refining the imagination or raising it to a new level, an experience that yields new surges of power and teaches the subject to love the object that inspires such feelings.

The sadness that provokes and shadows the imaginative leap is, of course, the recognition of personal limitations. As the paradigm implicit in *The Rights of Men* and *The Rights of Woman* suggested, the

growth of self-consciousness always yields this bitter fruit. But an index of Wollstonecraft's maturity here is her new willingness to explore the face of death, to accept the fact of human limitations without automatic recourse to religious consolation. The specific loss that haunts her now is, of course, the loss of her lover, Imlay. But she knows that his absence, like all partings, is essentially "death-like," "a sort of separation of soul," "something torn from ourselves" (p. 176). Such shades of imminent annihilation darken nearly every episode in the *Letters*; for a work that essentially celebrates imaginative power, it is remarkably uninhibited in acknowledging the bondage of life to death. When Wollstonecraft relishes "a thrill of delight," for example, in remembering past joy, the emotion surges out of her recollection of her dead "dear friend," Fanny Blood (p. 59); and when she enters an empty mansion, she imagines that its owners are dead, that the worm "riots unchecked" in their corpses (p. 84). Similarly, though the *Letters* describes a summer's journey, Wollstonecraft's thoughts repeatedly turn to winter, summer's icy sepulcher. Watching the Swedish women wash clothes, for instance, she leaps imaginatively to the crueler season to come, when "their hands, cut by the ice, are cracked and bleeding" (p. 26). At one point her sense of winter so completely overpowers the present that she momentarily forgets her whereabouts. The progression in this passage, from concrete description to imaginative vision, without even a shift in verb tense, demonstrates the progress of the imagination and the way that death provokes it and shadows its flight:

The clouds caught their hue of the rocks that menaced them. The sun appeared afraid to shine, the birds ceased to sing, and the flowers to bloom. . . . The farm houses, in which only poverty resided, were formed of logs scarcely keeping off the cold and drifting snow; out of them the inhabitants seldom peeped, and the sports or prattling of children was neither seen nor heard. The current of life seemed congealed at the source: all were not frozen; for it was summer, you remember; but every thing appeared so dull, that I waited to see ice, in order to reconcile me to the absence of gaiety. [P. 42]

The perception that initiates this imaginative flight is once more a feeling of loss ("the absence of gaiety") and danger (menacing rocks, an obscured sun). But, even though Wollstonecraft's fear carries over into her vision, the fundamental experience is one of transcendence and power. Responding to the threat sensed in the natural world, the imagination carries the observer out of this setting naturally, without calling attention to its own presence. From direct perception ("the clouds caught"), the mind moves to imaginative projection ("the sun appeared afraid"), then to imaginative "perception" of a fully realized visionary landscape ("the birds ceased to sing, and the flowers to bloom"). Self-consciousness intrudes only after the liberation is ac-

complished, only after the sensed danger has been replaced by the harmless, “sublimated,” vision of winter. Wollstonecraft’s willingness to engage herself in life and to trust her imagination even in its confrontations with death has enabled her to experience and dramatize a more fully realized version of the self-affirmation she tried to describe in the *Rights of Men*.

Imagination has the power to affirm the subject, but Wollstonecraft does not grant it autonomy; for here, more conspicuously than in any of her earlier works, she presents the temporal, natural world as the necessary ground of speculation and the crucial field of experience. Nature is “the nurse of sentiment” (p. 58) that both provokes the imagination and provides the images it then takes up. Because she no longer dreads the physical world (or implicitly, the body), Wollstonecraft no longer rejects the sensual images the imagination presents or the longings it arouses. Although she knows that, in “such an imperfect state of existence,” responsiveness to nature is painful, hence dangerous, she also knows that only the emotions excited by the real world test the individual’s capacity for love and unfold his or her noblest desires: “an affection for mankind, a passion for an individual, is but the unfolding of that love which embraces all that is great and beautiful” (p. 58).

Nature also controls imaginative reveries; for all its “faery power,” the imagination can neither generate its own images nor deny physical reality. In Sweden, for example, Wollstonecraft finds that she cannot escape the smell of decaying herrings, which repeatedly intrudes upon her reveries (p. 41). The imagination is also incapable of actually reproducing experience; its power is limited to “amusement,” to provoking each individual to his or her private imaginative excursions—a fact that makes communication problematic: “We cannot find words to discriminate that individuality [of a mountain prospect] so as to enable a stranger to say, this is the face, that the view. We may amuse by setting the imagination to work; but we cannot store the memory with a fact” (pp. 37–38).

Because Wollstonecraft recognizes that all perception is inevitably subjective, she uses natural objects to mediate her relationship with her audience. Even though her “jaundiced eye of melancholy” may color every thought (p. 169), she is able to communicate her emotions because she anchors them in the specific physical settings to which they correspond. Nature serves as a common reference point, a touchstone shared by Wollstonecraft and her audience, even though the readers may never see the landscapes for themselves. And because nature facilitates communication, concrete descriptions also anchor the most important organizational unit in the *Letters*. In a typical episode, Wollstonecraft essentially duplicates the activity of

her own mind: she observes a natural object or scene, is inspired to an imaginative or intellectual excursion, and then returns to "the straight road" of observing the natural world.⁶ The return is frequently abrupt, however, and Wollstonecraft often accomplishes it only by concluding a letter; for the imagination repeatedly strains away from the natural world or threatens to center obsessively on the self.

Wollstonecraft's journey through the barren splendor of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark is most significantly a journey into the depths of her own complex personality. Several critics have noted the similarities between her *Letters* and Wordsworth's *Prelude*,⁷ and perhaps the most interesting point of comparison is in their presentations of self. Wordsworth explicitly but unobtrusively uses his vocation as a poet to organize and justify his autobiographical excursion; to mediate her observations, Wollstonecraft uses what she now sees as the most important aspect of her self—her femaleness. Wollstonecraft introduces her gender less self-consciously here than in the *Rights of Woman*; she simply notes matter-of-factly her acquaintances' surprise that a woman should travel to such unusual places (pp. 10, 54) and ask "men's questions" (p. 15). In many respects, Wollstonecraft is *not* like other women (as the comparison with her delicate maid, Marguerite, proves), but she insists that her interests and emotions are quintessentially female. No male observer would consider details about child care or women servants significant; no man would contemplate the dilemma of a daughter with "a mother's fondness and anxiety" (p. 55). Wollstonecraft now realizes that her position as a woman has all along dictated both the nature of her experiences and her responses. Her emotion is a woman's emotion, and her thoughts spring from these depths, not simply from asexual reason. "We reason deeply," she comments, "when we forcibly feel" (p. 160).

Like many Romantic poets, Wollstonecraft is aware of the way her (female) consciousness affects her perception of the landscape and the self she would describe. As in her personal letters from Ireland in 1787, Wollstonecraft speaks here of her own life as a text to be read; she has "turned over in this solitude a new page in the history of [her] own heart" (pp. 90–91). Now, however, she is more conscious both of the subjective power implicit in this self-objectification and of the consequent danger of distortion. The self-conscious Wollstonecraft is, like Wordsworth, an observant I as well as an observing eye; yet she does not want her own interpretation of experience to obscure completely the scenes she wants to convey. Occasionally her solution to this dilemma suggests Wordsworth's "ennobling interchange;" for by humanizing natural objects ("the bones of the world" [p. 42]) and by naturalizing human beings (her child is "sweet as the closing flowers" [p. 16]), she dramatizes a reciprocity between nature and the individu-

al's perception of it. More typically, however, she qualifies her subjective response to experience by couching it in borrowed language. Because she still questions her ability to "read" nature as authoritatively as male poets have done, the book of nature remains for her a text to be read through other texts. An allusive, poetic description of nature seems to her to be simultaneously authoritative and deeply, personally, felt. Thus, she imaginatively flees an interminable meal for a more inviting "landscape":

A never ending, still beginning feast may be bearable, perhaps, when stern winter frowns, shaking with chilling aspect his hoary locks; but during a summer, sweet as fleeting, let me, my kind strangers, escape sometimes into your fir groves, wander on the margin of your beautiful lakes, or climb your rocks to view still others in endless perspective; which, piled by more than giant's hand, scale the heavens to intercept its rays [an allusion to *Paradise Lost* 4. 354-55], or to receive the parting tinge of lingering day—day that, scarcely softened into twilight, allows the freshening breeze to wake, and the moon to burst forth in all her glory to glide with solemn elegance through the azure expanse. [P. 23]

Only when Wollstonecraft describes a scene still uncaptured by poetic rhetoric does she effectively dramatize her subjective engagement with the object. Few poets have described the woman's sphere—the details of domestic economy, of housekeeping or cooking in these remote regions—and few poets have noticed young starfish:

I was amused by disturbing the innumerable young star fish which floated just below the surface: I had never observed them before; for they have not a hard shell, like those which I have seen on the sea-shore. They look like thickened water, with a white edge; and four purple circles, of different forms, were in the middle, over an incredible number of fibres, or white lines. Touching them, the cloudy substance would turn or close, first on one side, then on the other, very gracefully; but when I took one of them up in the ladle with which I heaved the water out of the boat, it appeared only a colourless jelly. [P. 76]

Wollstonecraft's images are not particularly "poetic," but they are vivid and concrete, and they reveal her curiosity and inquisitiveness. Her typical relationship to nature suggests more of the eighteenth-century empiricist's fascination with details than a Wordsworthian appreciation of imaginative power, but her consciousness of the subjectivity of perception distinguishes her, even in such a passage, from earlier cataloguers of natural phenomena.

Wollstonecraft's oblique invocation of literary authorities is in fact the only remaining sign of the insecurity that pervades her earlier works. In the *Letters* she is much less anxious to anchor her subjective judgments in external, objective authorities. This is especially obvious in her presentation of her religious sentiments.⁸ The *Letters* is not

without references to God, but Wollstonecraft is now much less orthodox in describing God's order and much more inclined to substitute nontheological phrases like "a mighty whole" (p. 17), "all that is great and beautiful" (p. 58), for more traditional, monotheistic terms. Wollstonecraft also now openly acknowledges the fact that her religious inclinations arise from fear and desire as much as from demonstrable evidence:

Without hope, what is to sustain life, but the fear of annihilation—the only thing of which I have ever felt a dread—I cannot bear to think of being no more—of losing myself . . . ; 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. . . . Surely something resides in this heart that is not perishable—and life is more than a dream. [P. 76]

Mitzi Myers, in discussing the *Letters* as a prototype of Romantic autobiography, has pointed out that much of the integrity of Wollstonecraft's persona comes from her particular use of the travelogue form itself. Not only does the travelogue provide a natural organizing principle for the interrelation of observation, speculation, and personal expression, but doubling the actual journey, as Wordsworth was to do, with a metaphoric excursion of self-exploration enables Wollstonecraft to evolve a continuity of personality that encompasses the variety of attitudes, roles, and possibilities the journey evokes. According to Myers, the "circuitous, subjective movement of the mind" constitutes the organizing principle that turns the "discontinuous form" of epistolary travel narrative into "an agent of continuity."⁹ Moreover,

just as . . . the demonstration of the powers of her mind . . . holds the book together formally, so the writing of the book quite literally holds her together, as she discovers her power to overcome fragmentation, the power of the self to create unity and make sense of its multiple roles and painful experiences. To give the book its unity is at the same to assert an identity. The work and the self exist in a reciprocal relationship, the work itself an image of what the self can achieve.¹⁰

In an important sense, Wollstonecraft's *Letters* enables her to objectify her tumultuous emotions in a form that does not demand an integrated, fully formed persona. In such a form, writing can become an act of self-creation rather than self-assertion, the uninhibited revelation of the *process* of seeking inner equilibrium. Wollstonecraft uses the public nature of the travelogue to control the intensity of personal anguish and direct the focus of her inquiry outward into a finished form; but she uses the epistolary form of her narrative to signify the temporal and personal dimensions of what is effectively an ongoing process. "Her persona is not a congealed and completed self (this is

what I am), but the protagonist of a quest still uncompleted at the book's conclusion (who am I, and where am I going)."¹¹

Wollstonecraft's *Letters*, as the mirror of a maturing self and self-consciousness, does have a plot of sorts, although the most significant unit of action is not the volume as a whole but the movement from observation to imaginative speculation that I have already described. Taken as a whole, however, the *Letters* details the narrator's passage from an initial state of poised expectation (an emotional as well as a nautical "becalmment"), through a period of energetic exploration, observation, and self-discovery, to a gradual decline into melancholy and anger. The specific motives for these emotional developments are left unspecified in the *Letters*, even though Wollstonecraft provides sufficient hints to communicate the general reason for her anguish. A more complete record of the emotional journey is available, however, in her private letters to Imlay, which were published posthumously by Godwin.¹² These letters provide the implicit but suppressed plot of her travelogue. From them it is clear that Wollstonecraft's spirits were initially kept high by her belief that the separation from her unfaithful lover was to be temporary, a period of decision-making for Imlay and (she convinced herself) an opportunity for him to recognize the value of her fidelity. Despite the obvious pain and sorrow Wollstonecraft continued to feel, her letters to Imlay do not become obsessed by anguish or resentment until August 1795, at which time she received letters from him that revealed the extent of his disaffection—and her delusion.¹³ Her pain and anger build in her letters from Gothenburg and Copenhagen, as she struggles to come to terms with Imlay's unworthiness,¹⁴ and, by the time she writes from Hamburg, her lingering hopes have been almost completely extinguished by her rising determination to survive this emotional devastation. "Preparing [her]self for the worst," Wollstonecraft announces to Imlay her plan to provide for their daughter Fanny and, by doing so, she severs the financial tie that she knows he can best understand.¹⁵

In the *Letters Written . . . in Sweden*, the most perceptible turn in the persona's feelings begins in Letter XXII, which narrates her arrival at Corsoer from Copenhagen. Recognition of the death of her love affair with Imlay surfaces in her acute consciousness of the significance of separation ("always a most melancholy, death-like idea" [p. 176]) and her sensitivity to the transience of all joy (pp. 174–75). She valiantly attempts to achieve some distance from her own sorrow by emphasizing the insignificance of all individuals; but even as she praises "the design of the Deity" in preserving the species, her imagination dwells on individual tragedies rather than "the grand plan of the universe": "Children peep into existence, suffer, and die; men

play like moths about a candle, and sink into the flame: war, and 'the thousand ills which flesh is heir to,' mow them down in shoals" (p. 180). As Wollstonecraft's return to London looms closer, her ability to maintain perspective on her own situation diminishes, and her personal pain moves nearer to the center of her narrative. Everywhere in Germany she sees signs of commercial activity, a hated reminder of the villain she believes to be behind the transformation of Imlay's loving countenance into his present "money-getting face." Now she cannot refrain from turning her general castigation of commerce into a personal warning to Imlay, as if hoping that heartfelt pleas in this public form will effect what all her private communications have failed to do. "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" (p. 187). In Imlay's growing preoccupation with business Wollstonecraft confronts the logical extension of the bourgeois energy she celebrated in the *Rights of Men*; one measure of the change she has undergone is that she now cherishes emotional stability and domestic affection over this restless desire for "improvement." Such exertion she now sees as a kind of selfishness, which actually prevents the individual from self-improvement because it concentrates all interest and desire on the self.

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. [P. 190]

Considering herself a sacrificial lamb not so much to Imlay ("You will rouse yourself, and shake off the vile dust that obscures you," she tenaciously believes) but to the commercial spirit invading society, Wollstonecraft melodramatically casts herself as an unheard Cassandra (p. 190) and as a pathetic, betrayed child (p. 184). Both characterizations verge on self-pity; despite her determination to conquer sorrow and her courageous descent into pain, Wollstonecraft comes very close in these last letters to lapsing into her old role of sentimental sufferer. Only by resolutely turning her attention outward once more, to initiate the confrontation that awaits her, is she able to regain sufficient energy to transform her bitterness into a blessing. Her final letter concludes on a note whose triumph is wrested from sadness.

Adieu! My spirit of observation seems to be fled—and I have been wandering round this dirty place, literally speaking, to kill time; though the thoughts, I would fain fly from, lie too close to my heart to be easily shook off, or even beguiled, by any employment, except that of preparing for my journey to London. —God bless you! [P. 196]

If Wollstonecraft does not achieve sufficient stability of character to weather the storm raging within her it is because she is no longer willing to purchase “philosophical contentment” at the price of felt needs. To a woman demanding emotional and sexual fulfillment as well as respect and intellectual independence, satisfaction did not come easily in the late eighteenth century. Indeed, given the tendency of patriarchal society to estimate a woman’s value precisely according to her passivity—to her willingness to be an object of desire rather than a human being with needs, and a symbol of property rather than its possessor—satisfaction on Wollstonecraft’s terms was virtually unattainable. Her maturation as a self-made woman was taking her directly into the vortex of this contradiction, and the rapid growth of her self-consciousness during the last years of her life can be seen as a recognition of and response to bourgeois society’s pervasive devaluation of her sex. In the *Letters Written . . . in Sweden* the villain Wollstonecraft identifies is still an individual—Imlay—and the lust for wealth she attacks is only the faceless tyrant by whom she hopes to excuse his infidelity. But with the growth of her recognition that her own capacity for emotion could become an aggressive version of the emotionalism other women shared, Wollstonecraft comes face to face with the institutional force that stands behind every individual man. The villain she was to identify in her next work was bourgeois society itself and, more particularly, the institution of marriage. Within marriage, even the potential power of female feeling is twisted back on itself and strangles into silence the woman who tries to tell the world of society’s wrongs.

Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman

For most of Mary Wollstonecraft’s life her uncommon energy and determination seemed fated to be squandered in false pursuits and on inferior objects. And for a while it appeared that her resolution would make the characteristic female revolution: turning back on her self, she would determine to die. The inconstancy of her American lover twice drove Wollstonecraft to attempt suicide. Imlay himself saved her the first time and then sent her packing off to Sweden to recover her peace of mind. Then, on her return, when she found him still evasive, still indecisive, and had to force her cook to tell her what everyone else already knew—that Imlay had taken another lover—she rowed herself to Putney Bridge, walked in the rain for an hour to soak her skirts, and threw herself in the Thames. Boatmen pulled her from the water, however, and gradually her determination and her strong emotions revived once more.

Wollstonecraft emerged from the Imlay affair still resolute, still

fixed on obtaining the happiness and fulfillment she considered the birthright of women as well as men. In the last year and a half of her life she struck up a friendship with William Godwin, fell in love again, and, when she found herself pregnant once more, married the evangelist of reason in order to spare her unborn child from shame. For at least this short period Wollstonecraft relished the joys of motherhood, marriage, and intellectual freedom. She found that "a husband is a convenient part of the furniture of a house" (*MWL*, p. 396; 6 June 1797) and that, as she wrote Godwin, "There is such a magic in affection that I have been more gratified by your clasping your hands round my arm, in company, than I could have been by all the admiration in the world, tho' I am a woman—and to mount a step higher in the scale of vanity, an author" (*MWL*, p. 360; 10 November 1796).

Yet, as a woman and an author, Wollstonecraft refused to sacrifice the independence she had earned. "My conduct in life must be directed by my own judgment and moral principles," she explained to the wondering Amelia Alderson; "in short, I still mean to be independent, even to the cultivating sentiments and principles in my children's minds . . . which he [Godwin] disavows" (*MWL*, p. 389; 11 April 1797). To prove their independence, Wollstonecraft and Godwin lived in adjoining houses, visited separately, and kept their ideas at least partly discrete.¹⁶ Wollstonecraft's brief physical and intellectual independence, however, did not guarantee her freedom from her society's system of values. Nor did her brief happiness blind her to the circumstances that continued to cause her pain. If anything, this respite from sorrow honed her anger and her righteous indignation and gave her sufficient self-possession to try once more to turn her wrath upon its proper object. "I am not such a child as I thought myself," she wrote to Godwin (*MWL*, p. 365; 28 November 1796). In her last work she speaks with her newfound woman's voice and from a "full heart," but her message is that the struggle has just begun.

In *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), Wollstonecraft sought to popularize the insights of *The Rights of Woman* by turning to a genre she felt confident women would read: the sentimental novel. But the attempt to fictionalize "the peculiar Wrongs of Woman" afflicted Wollstonecraft—for perhaps the first time in her life—with what seems very like writer's block. She had composed *The Rights of Men* in less than a month and *The Rights of Woman* in six weeks, but she spent a year working on *Maria*, only to leave the manuscript less than a third finished when she died. Godwin's description of its composition reveals that the work induced an insistent anxiety:

She began it in several forms, which she successively rejected, after they were considerably advanced. She wrote many parts of the work again and again,

and, when she had finished what she intended for the first part, she felt herself more urgently stimulated to revise and improve what she had written, than to proceed, with constancy of application, in the parts that were to follow.¹⁷

Almost any passage from the text of this much belabored first part reveals that the hesitation that afflicted its creation haunts its prose as well. Syntax is frequently blurred, narratives are broken off literally in midsentence, and, most problematic of all, the relationship between the narrative consciousness and that of the heroine is inconsistent. All of the hesitations in composition and achievement culminate, in fact, in a conspicuous failure to establish a consistent or purposeful attitude toward the subject under consideration. Even though *Maria* is an unfinished novel, then, both the time that Wollstonecraft devoted to it and the problems that characteristically beset it suggest that she was having as much difficulty with this genre as she had once had with political disquisition.

The problem was not simply that Wollstonecraft could not construct a successful narrative, for both her first novel, *Mary*, and the story of Jemima, contained within *Maria*, demonstrate her competence as a storyteller. The problem apparently lay, rather, in the difficulty she had in reconciling her intended “purpose” with the genre, which here shapes the “structure” of the work.¹⁸ According to her sketchy preface, Wollstonecraft’s purpose was political, to show “the peculiar Wrongs of Woman.”¹⁹ And her structure, like the structure of what she calls “our best novels,” was intended to delineate “finer sensations” rather than “stage-effect,” “passions rather than manners” (pp. 8, 7). The problem here was not, as it was in *The Rights of Men*, that Wollstonecraft tried to suppress the emotion she feared was inappropriate to the genre she had chosen. Instead, the *kind* of feeling that was appropriate to this genre was precisely the kind that aborted her political purpose. For the emotionalism that had so long crippled Wollstonecraft, along with the sentimental “structure” developed to dramatize such “finer sensations,” were deeply implicated in the values—indeed, the very organization—of bourgeois society. It is Wollstonecraft’s recognition of the incompatibility and—equally to the point—her resistance to this recognition that account for both the hesitations of composition and the contradictions that mark the text. In this, her final work, Wollstonecraft identified one aspect of what she held to be the tyranny of eighteenth-century bourgeois institutions; yet, because her own values—indeed, her own self-definition—were inextricably bound up with the values of these institutions, she was unable to pursue her revolutionary insights to their logical conclusion.²⁰

Wollstonecraft’s dilemma is epitomized by the uncertain perspective of the novel’s omniscient narrator. In chapter 4, for example,

which traces Maria's emotional surrender to a fellow inmate, the narrator moves from judgmental observer to unreflecting sympathizer. Maria has been imprisoned in a madhouse so that her avaricious husband can gain control of the independent fortunes of both Maria and their infant daughter. As in *The Rights of Woman*, Maria's "situation" proves critical. At the beginning of the chapter, the narrative voice comments authoritatively on this situation. "Pity," the narrator observes,

and the forlorn seriousness of adversity, have both been considered as dispositions favourable to love, while satirical writers have attributed the propensity to the relaxing effect of idleness; what chance then had Maria of escaping, when pity, sorrow, and solitude all conspired to soften her mind, and nourish romantic wishes, and, from a natural progress, romantic expectations? [P. 48]

The most pressing question here is the narrator's attitude toward Maria's "romantic expectations." The rhetoric of imprisonment suggests that, at the very least, Wollstonecraft understands such wishes to originate in deprivation and confinement. An adjacent passage, moreover, underscores the insight that "romantic expectations" are actually projections of unanswered desire. "Having had to struggle incessantly with the vices of mankind," the narrator continues,

Maria's imagination found repose in pourtraying the possible virtues the world might contain. Pygmalion formed an ivory maid, and longed for an informing soul. She, on the contrary, combined all the qualities of a hero's mind, and fate presented a statue in which she might enshrine them. [P. 49]

The "statue" is Maria's fellow prisoner, Henry Darnford, who soon emerges from featureless obscurity to become a vital force in her drama. But the narrator remains curiously ambivalent about the precise nature of his role. Her description of Maria's emotional surrender, for example, culminates in a question that seems to announce the narrator's shrewd awareness that "romantic expectations" often do not correspond to real possibilities. Yet the ambiguous origin of the sentiments expressed in the first part of this passage suggests that the narrator still harbors the hope that such romantic expectations might be fulfilled. As the two lovers embrace, "desire was lost in more ineffable emotions, and to protect her from insult and sorrow—to make her happy, seemed not only the first wish of his heart, but the most noble duty of his life. Such angelic confidence demanded the fidelity of honour; but could he, feeling her in every pulsation, could he ever change, could he be a villain?" (p. 50) Is this question the narrator's ironic reminder of the possible delusion inherent in "romantic expectations"? Or does it represent the narrator's desperate attempt to resist the "ineffable emotions" that already seduce Maria? By the end of this brief chapter the distance between the narrator and

Maria almost wholly disappears; even allowing for ironic overtones, as some modern editors do, the enthusiastic rhetoric of this passage suggests that the narrator shares Maria's "romantic wishes" and perhaps her "romantic aspirations" as well:

So much of heaven did they enjoy, that paradise bloomed around them; or they, by a powerful spell, had been transported into Armida's garden. Love, the grand enchanter, "lapt them in Elysium," and every sense was harmonized to joy and social extacy. [P. 51]

This chapter is particularly revealing because the progression of the narrator here—from detached, critical observer to emotional participant—recapitulates the movement that constitutes the organization and, theoretically, the target of criticism of the novel. The movement is the "fall" into female sexuality or, more precisely, the fall into the susceptibility to romantic expectations that eighteenth-century culture annexed to female sexuality. The problem here is that the narrator—and, by implication, Wollstonecraft herself—has just fallen victim to the very delusion it is the object of this novel to criticize.

This seduction of the narrator constitutes the third occurrence of this pattern in the novel, and, taking all three together, we begin to glimpse both Wollstonecraft's insight and her dilemma. As if to emphasize the importance of this pattern, the novel opens *in medias res*, precisely at the moment when Maria is about to fall into romantic love for the second time. Just as Maria was initially confined in a loveless, repressed youth, so is she now confined in a madhouse. Just as she was "liberated" then into a loveless marriage, so is she now soon to be "released" into the ambiguous, but decidedly dangerous, embrace of Darnford. And—most tellingly from the perspective of the narrative—the pander in each case is sentimentality or, more precisely, a sentimental story.

In what is chronologically the first fall, the sentimental story involves Maria's uncle. Maria seeks from this uncle the love she does not receive from her parents. In return, he tries to teach her the defense against romantic expectations that he has acquired through disappointment. But the effect of the uncle's story is the reverse of what he had intended, as is clear from Maria's comment: "Endeavouring to prove to me that nothing which deserved the name of love or friendship, existed in the world, he drew such animated pictures of his own feelings . . . as imprinted the sentiments strongly on my heart, and animated my imagination" (p. 78). Because Maria has not personally experienced her uncle's disillusionment, she responds as contemporary moralists feared women "naturally" respond to sentimental novels; she is "imprinted" with sentiments as she projects

herself, a heroine, into his text. Her imagination, that is, is "animated" or aroused.²¹

In the absence of opportunities for action, the aroused imagination projects desire onto whatever comes its way. Her uncle's sentiments, Maria says, along with the books he lends her, "conspired . . . to make [her] form an ideal picture of life," and the emotional vacuum of her home leads her to project her idealism onto a young neighbor, George Venables. Rather shrewdly, Venables remains silent throughout their courtship, for his attraction lies precisely in the imaginative opportunity he presents. In retrospect, Maria recognizes that what she had thought was love was simply an externalization of her own desire:

He [George] continued to single me out at the dance, press my hand at parting, and utter expressions of unmeaning passion, to which I gave a meaning naturally suggested by the romantic turn of my thoughts. . . . When he left us, the colouring of my picture became more vivid—Whither did not my imagination lead me? In short, I fancied myself in love—in love with the disinterestedness, fortitude, generosity, dignity, and humanity, with which I had invested the hero I dubbed. [P. 80]

Even Maria's wishful idealism, however, cannot survive the brutal reality of marriage with Venables. Soon after marrying, she discovers that what she had imagined to be his love was actually avarice; he really wanted only the £5,000 Maria's uncle had settled on her as a dowry.

In the madhouse in which Venables eventually has his wife confined, the same pattern again threatens Maria. Despite the fact that she now has personally experienced sorrow, she is once more seduced by sentiment. This time the pander is exclusively textual: first some marginalia written by her unseen fellow prisoner, then one of the books he lends her—Rousseau's *Julie*. Once more the narrator's description suggests that Maria's reading leads to a dangerous kind of projection, which is also a form of artistry. Having just glimpsed the owner of the books through her barred window, Maria gives the unknown "all St. Preux's sentiments and feelings, culled to gratify her own" (p. 38). It comes as no surprise, then, that the seduction of Maria's imagination culminates in her sexual acquiescence to Henry Darnford—that she receives him "as her husband" (p. 138), just as she had earlier received Venables.

What is surprising is that the narrator does not underscore the similarity of Maria's two falls. Instead of either a consistent condemnation of Maria's situation—an enforced inactivity that nurtures romantic expectations—or a description of a fully satisfying relationship, we get the narrative ambivalence we have already seen. At the very point at which the narrator should shape the "structure" to her

“purpose” so as to enlighten the reader, we find more passages like the following:

With Darnford she did not taste uninterrupted felicity; there was a volatility in his manner which often distressed her; but love gladdened the scene; besides, he was the most tender, sympathizing creature in the world. A fondness for the sex often gives an *appearance* of humanity to the behaviour of men, who have small pretensions to the reality; and they *seem* to love others, when they are only pursuing their own gratification. Darnford *appeared* ever willing to avail himself of her taste and acquirements. [p. 143; emphasis added]

We know that Venables was one of those men who have only an appearance of humanity, but is Henry Darnford another? Is Darnford going to betray Maria? In most of the endings Wollstonecraft projected for the book, she certainly suggests that he will. The six fragments Godwin printed at the end of *Maria* all imply Darnford's unreliability: in the first and most optimistic, the lovers simply remain separated; in the last, the outcome is more explicit. “Her lover unfaithful,” the fragment reads. “Pregnancy—Miscarriage—Suicide” (p. 152). But the bleakness of these projected conclusions is still qualified by the narrator's determined optimism. In describing Maria's love for Darnford, the narrator claims, not very convincingly, to resolve the paradox: “We see what we wish, and make a world of our own,” she acknowledges, “and, though reality may sometimes open a door to misery, yet the moments of happiness procured by the imagination, may, without a paradox, be reckoned among the solid comforts of life” (p. 139).

It is as if the narrator here is resisting the implications of the very insight her story dramatizes, as if she would like to retain, for as long as possible, the idealism she has shown to cripple Maria. In order fully to understand the implications of Wollstonecraft's narrative hesitations we need to return to those insights, to see precisely how feminine romanticism blasts female sexuality, and how female sexuality, as Wollstonecraft depicts it, is defined by bourgeois society and by the narratives that inculcate its values.

Mary Wollstonecraft's fundamental insight in *Maria* concerns the way in which female sexuality is defined or interpreted—and, by extension, controlled—by bourgeois institutions. The primary agent of this control is marriage, which is, as Tony Tanner has remarked, the fundamental “mythology of bourgeois society.” With its institutionalization of kinship distinctions and alliances, its harnessing of individual sexual desire to the economic unit of the nuclear family, marriage is the basis of “all the models, conscious and unconscious, by which society structures all its operations and transactions.”²² As we have seen, according to bourgeois conventions, female sexuality

can be legitimately expressed—indeed, can exist as a positive cultural sign—only within the institution of marriage. For, confined within marriage, female sexuality is deprived of its power both to devour a man sexually and to rob him of his ability to identify his heirs. Wollstonecraft is recognizing here not only the consequences of ideology but also its roots and its institutional guardians. The penetration of her analysis of this ideology is remarkable. She recognizes, for example, that marriage makes women property, “as much a man’s property as his horse or his ass,” as Maria observes (p. 107). Moreover, by making women the vehicles by which property is transferred from one man to another, from one generation to the next, marriage objectifies women. And, as objects, women lose their rights—even, finally, the right to act upon their own desire: within marriage, as Maria phrases it, the woman is “required to moralize, sentimentalize herself to stone” (p. 102).

Because the kind of economically advantageous marriages that frequently took place in this period often entailed reducing women to symbols of property, depriving them of the status of autonomous individuals, such transactions had to be enforced not only by laws but by a set of values that could make inequality seem “right” and even “natural.” In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft elaborates on her recognition that one of this system’s most effective agents was propriety, the internalized set of values that encouraged women to sublimate their potentially anarchic desires. As she had already pointed out in *The Rights of Woman*, in her society this system of values was intimately connected with sentimentalism. In *Maria*, Wollstonecraft sees even more clearly sentimentalism’s paradoxical nature: its role is both to arouse female sexuality and to control it.²³ In the first of these two functions, exemplified by Maria’s adolescence, sentimental stories arouse a young woman’s imagination (and, by extension, her potentially promiscuous erotic desire) by engaging her vicariously in thinly disguised sexual exploits. But because the young girl is protected (or confined) by both ignorance and inexperience, the expectations generated by reading romantic stories lead her to project her desire uncritically onto a single man, a “hero,” with whom she then seeks to realize her imaginative and sexual desires—ideally, through marriage.

The irony (and tragedy) of this situation is that, as often as not, the desire so aroused exceeds the gratification offered women through marriage. Precisely because one effect of marriage was to limit desire and, more perniciously (especially given the legal and economic restrictions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), to strip women of their status as autonomous subjects, sentimentalism theoretically generated a clash between female desire and male will. For, once imprisoned within marriage, a woman existed in the same state of

confinement that characterized her adolescence. Thus the desire could threaten to begin again, to lead a woman to seek fulfillment outside the marriage bed. But the second effect of sentimental novels curtailed this threat. Despite the ominous specters of adultery and seduction in eighteenth-century sentimental novels, the function of such flirtations with transgression was actually to sublimate female desire, to provide vicarious gratification, which compensated for the diminished fulfillment of marriage. One function of sentimental novels, then, was actually to reinforce the institution that the desire they aroused could theoretically have subverted.

This was not, of course, the only or even the most explicit function of sentimentalism. As the etymological kinship suggests, “sentimental” was closely allied with both “sentiments” and “sensibility” and thus implied both an initial physiological sensation and the quality of response that that sensation produced.²⁴ During most of the eighteenth century, “sentimental” did not carry the pejorative connotations we now often associate with it; instead, it suggested feelings that were not only strong but rational. The values associated with sentimentalism were therefore moral as well as aesthetic, and, especially in the second half of the century, sentimental theories were advanced to support many humane programs—from the liberation of the American colonies and enslaved Negroes to the more humanitarian treatment of the English poor.

But even though Wollstonecraft adamantly supported the humanitarian causes with which sentimentalism was associated during the last decades of the century, she repeatedly voiced grave reservations about the “sensibility” that sentimental novels nourished in women. For the very sensibility that might temper a man’s acquisitive materialism could easily simply overwhelm women, who were neither consistently encouraged to discipline feeling by reason nor provided with constructive outlets for their aroused emotions. In *The Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft had already lamented the fact that cultivating sensibility makes women “the prey of their senses”; she now knows that the fact that men consider such volatility one of women’s most “feminine,” hence attractive, qualities indicates the extent to which men are anxious to perpetuate their own power at the expense of women’s autonomy.

This recognition of the sentimental ways and means of marital tyranny is the heart of Wollstonecraft’s insight in *Maria*. Yet despite the clarity of many of Maria’s statements about marriage, the heroine remains ominously attracted to the very sentimentalism that has twice ensnared her. “True sensibility,” she calls it, “the sensibility which is the auxiliary of virtue, and the soul of genius, is in society so occupied with the feelings of others, as scarcely to regard its own

sensations" (p. 126). Even after the scheming brutality of Venables theoretically opens her eyes to the naïveté of such sentiments, Maria continues to extol the selflessness of "*active sensibility*" and to encourage her infant daughter to perpetuate her own mistakes: "Whilst your own heart is sincere," she writes in the memoirs she intends for her daughter, "always expect to meet one glowing with the same sentiments" (p. 77).

This returns us to the central problem, for what is confusing here is how Wollstonecraft intends her readers to take the character of Maria. Do Maria's repeated lapses into the sentimental jargon that Wollstonecraft denounces constitute an ironic presentation? And, if so, does the irony extend to Maria's insights about marriage? Or is Wollstonecraft herself prey to the same delusive "romantic expectations" that she shows crippling Maria? And, if so, what does this tell us about the tyrannical complicity between marriage and sentimentalism that Wollstonecraft is trying to expose?

The most telling argument for reading the characterization of Maria ironically is Wollstonecraft's juxtaposition of Maria's first-person narrative with another first-person narrative, that of Jemima, Maria's warder in the madhouse. Jemima's story is decidedly *unsentimental*. Her history begins not with romantic expectations but with sexual violation ("My father . . . seduced my mother"), and it details the events of a continuing victimization: Jemima is raped by her master when she is sixteen, and the ensuing pregnancy drives her into the streets. After a self-inflicted abortion, poverty forces Jemima into prostitution. But as a self-sufficient prostitute, Jemima experiences an unorthodox, if momentary, freedom, a freedom that, no matter how qualified, Wollstonecraft says Jemima "values": "my independence," Jemima calls it. Such subversive independence cannot be tolerated, however; night watchmen, jealous of her autonomy, soon drive Jemima to seek refuge in institutionalized prostitution—first in a whorehouse, then in a relationship with a "worn-out votary of voluptuousness." This sexual exploitation marks Jemima's entry into middle-class society: the old man teaches her to read and confines her in a monogamous relationship. Upon her lover's death, Jemima learns the other face of bourgeois security: along with her freedom she has squandered her rights. Left penniless, Jemima is reduced, in rapid order, to being a washerwoman, a thief, and a pauper before she finds employment in the madhouse to which Maria is confined.

As the result of her being persecuted, Jemima has developed both intellectual resolution and emotional resilience. "The treatment that rendered me miserable," she comments, "seemed to sharpen my wits" (p. 53), and with these "sharpened wits" she learns how to survive in this culture: she endures by "despis[ing] and prey[ing] on

the society by which she had been oppressed" (p. 31). Despite the fact that she is a victim, Jemima is also a survivor—and potentially a new kind of heroine as well.

For if Jemima's experiences have taught her to despise men, they have not wholly frozen her to a more radical expression of female feeling: Jemima retains the capacity to love—not men, significantly, but women. Jemima's only childhood wish was for a "mother's affection," her only feelings of guilt stem from her having made another woman suffer, and she is quick to respond to Maria's anguish. Moreover, Jemima's "feminine emotions" are more resilient than Maria's nurtured, middle-class sensibility. When the two women finally escape the madhouse, Jemima goes first; and when they are confronted by a last, menacing male, the terrified Maria throws "her arms round Jemima" and cries, "Save me!" (p. 141). In the most developed of the projected conclusions to the novel, Wollstonecraft has Jemima save Maria once more, this time from an attempted suicide, by restoring to Maria her lost daughter and then ushering her into the female world just glimpsed at the end of this version.

Jemima's story—which is a radical, indeed feminist, story—has the potential to call into question both the organizational principles of bourgeois society and the sentimentalism that perpetuates romantic idealism. For the anarchy implicit in Jemima's brief assertion of female sexuality combines with the stark realism of the narrative to explode the assumptions that tie female sexuality to romance and thus to the institutions men traditionally control. But Wollstonecraft does *not* develop the revolutionary implications of Jemima's narrative. Instead, her story is quickly, ostentatiously, suppressed. Jemima's history occupies only one of the seventeen completed chapters of *Maria*, and it is suspended prematurely by an unspecified "indistinct noise" whose only function is to curtail this narrative. The only effect Jemima's narrative has on her auditors (two captives in a madhouse) is to produce in them "the most painful reflections on the present state of society" (not effective actions), and, after their escape, Jemima insists on being Maria's "house-keeper" (not her equal). The abrupt manner in which Jemima's story ends and the thoroughness with which her tough attitude is reabsorbed into Maria's sentimentalism suggest that Wollstonecraft is not willing to consider seriously so radical an alternative to women's oppression. Such a solution would entail renouncing not only the bourgeois institution of marriage but also the romantic expectations that motivate Maria and, we must conclude, the narrator as well.

For despite the strong suggestions that Maria's incorrigible romanticism is being presented ironically, despite Wollstonecraft's emphasis on the pernicious effects of sentimentalism, the narrator herself re-

peatedly lapses back into sentimental jargon and romantic idealism. At such moments the theoretical wisdom of the narrator simply collapses into the longing of the character. These repeated collapses are characteristically marked by Wollstonecraft's insistence on semantic distinctions where substantial differences do not in fact exist. "The real affections of life," she comments in a typical passage, "when they are allowed to burst forth, are buds pregnant with joy and all the sweet emotions of the soul. . . . The substantial happiness, which enlarges and civilizes the mind, may be compared to the pleasure experienced in roving through nature at large, inhaling the sweet gale natural to the clime" (pp. 143-44). In keeping with the renewed faith in physicality she exhibited in the *Letters Written . . . in Sweden*, Wollstonecraft desperately wants happiness to be "substantial," "real," physically possible. But the metaphorical language she uses to depict that happiness in *Maria* ("buds pregnant with joy") calls attention only to the literariness, the patent immateriality, of this ideal. Despite her anxious assertions that such happiness is "substantial" and that the "real affections of life" and "true sensibility" somehow differ from the romantic delusions that twice ensnare Maria, Wollstonecraft actually reveals only that her own ideals are insubstantial—that they are, in fact, part and parcel of the romantic idealism they are meant to transcend.

Repeatedly, then, the narrator falls victim to the same sentimental idealism that cripples Maria. Wollstonecraft continues to cherish the belief that, by fidelity to personal feelings kept pure of the taint of self-interest and the "grossness of sensuality," an individual can express a sensibility "true" in the most idealistic sense of that word. Yet even Wollstonecraft knows that something is wrong. In the crucible of her novel, things just don't work out that way: Darnford's love is "volatile," Maria's happiness is less substantial than the bars of her madhouse cell. And the fiction that Wollstonecraft believed "capable of producing an important effect" repeatedly threatens to lose sight of its political purpose and become just another sentimental novel.

Wollstonecraft seems aware that there is a gap between the realism of her isolated political observations and the idealism of her sentimental paradigms. And, as if searching for an antidote to her own susceptibility, she repeatedly aborts the sentimental structure of *Maria* in order to reassert her political purpose. At virtually every point at which the characters' stories begin to elicit the reader's identification, Wollstonecraft ruptures the narrative either by interjecting nondramatic political commentary, by simply severing the dramatic action, or by ejecting characters from the novel. The hiatuses in the novel are frequent and obtrusive, even in the chapters Godwin describes as finished. Yet, significantly, these ruptures are not expressions of am-

bivalence on Wollstonecraft's part toward sentimental *feeling*. Instead, they constitute one version of a crisis of confidence that we will see repeated in a much more severe form in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In order to salvage sentimental feeling, Wollstonecraft reverses the stance she had taken in *Letters Written . . . in Sweden* and focuses her criticism on one particular aspect of feeling—the creative, self-expressive imagination.

Wollstonecraft may well have singled out the imagination because, according to eighteenth-century psychological theories, it was the primary faculty of projection: in the gesture of sympathy, the imagination projects the self into another's situation; but in the exercise of vanity, the imagination simply projects personal desire onto the world at large. Because this latter tendency is so tied up with the former, Wollstonecraft remained ambivalent about the imagination; she considered it the "characteristic of genius," on the one hand, but, on the other, she remained wary of its affinity with sexuality and self-indulgence.²⁵ Like the conduct-book writers, Wollstonecraft was particularly suspicious of women's imaginative activity, not simply because women's passions were stronger but because women, lacking both personal experience and practical outlets for their energy, were especially tempted to project their desires into self-gratifying fictions *instead of* into real situations or real relationships. In her *Letters Written . . . in Sweden*, perceptions of nature had controlled imaginative excess, but in the madhouse, which is emblematic of women's characteristic situation (both social and emotional), nature, which can only be glimpsed through the barred windows, seems too wildly luxuriant or decayed to resist the voracious imagination. In so characterizing female creativity in *Maria*, Wollstonecraft seems to ask how many of women's imaginings are vain—vain, not only in the sense of self-centered, but in the root sense of that word, *vanus*, "empty, ineffectual."

Thus Wollstonecraft's ambivalence about feeling focuses most consistently on the very enterprise in which she, as an imaginative artist, is engaged. This ambivalence about the creative imagination becomes both a theme of *Maria* and a repeated agitator of the narrative structure. Wollstonecraft is wary of the products of the creative imagination because she fears they will have the effect on readers that Rousseau's *Julie* has on *Maria*: by engaging their readers' desire for immediate gratification, fictions *disengage* those readers from life; by eliciting imaginative identification, they feed wishful fantasies instead of initiating political action. Wollstonecraft breaks off the various narratives of *Maria* at their most affecting moments at least partly because she senses that the narrative contract established by the text is drawing the reader into stories that are patently not true and whose

aesthetic closure would artificially resolve whatever politically effective emotions the stories might arouse.

For the same reasons, Wollstonecraft is also ambivalent about the process of imaginative creation. For women especially, this opportunity for self-expression—and for imaginative escape—is particularly tempting, but it is also potentially ineffectual. In the madhouse Maria and Darnford both become artists, but while Darnford's compositions are primarily political, Maria becomes a sentimental writer. Her first compositions are "rhapsodies descriptive of the state of her mind" (pp. 30–31), and, as she begins to compose her own history, she finds herself embarked on an escapist, sentimental journey: "She lived again in the revived emotions of youth, and forgot her present in the retrospect of sorrows" (p. 31).

Wollstonecraft shows, however, that this kind of imaginative escape is really no escape at all. Maria's art is, in fact, an expression—perhaps even a cause—of her political impotence. The composition and effect of Maria's manuscript are almost a paradigm of female sentimental authorship; the writer is confined in a prison of "disproportioned" passion, the intended beneficiary (her absent daughter) is cut off from the purported moral, and the major reader (Darnford) is aroused by the story only to the "transporting" passion with which he soon seduces Maria. Despite Maria's determination to plot a real escape, her schemes produce only this romantic—and escapist—narrative. Her liberation comes only at the instigation of Darnford's male guards, and, outside the madhouse, she remains completely ineffectual. Just as she had earlier been outsmarted by the crafty George Venables (who is the novel's consummate artist, with the power to deploy as well as imagine plots), so Maria is now outdone by the obdurate masculine logic of the courts. In the last chapter of the novel, Maria is tried for adultery, but her written defense is as easily disposed of as any mere piece of paper. Wollstonecraft seems to fear that female logic—the argument based on feeling—has no authority among the men who author laws with the patriarchal fiat of their all-powerful Word.

In this final chapter of the novel, Wollstonecraft—through Maria's written defense—attempts one last time to fuse "purpose and structure," to find a form that will betray neither her political insights nor her feeling heart. The preceding sixteen chapters, whether narrated in first or third person, tended to be dramatic narratives and to highlight subjective responses; but in this final chapter Wollstonecraft tries to "restrain [her] fancy," to transcend such unreliable, because escapist, flights of the creative imagination. Here, by summarizing objective events rather than feelings in order to diminish the personal aspect of Maria's history, Wollstonecraft specifies the events that are the universal "Wrongs of Woman."

But Maria's final plea does not transcend the problem of women's ineffectualness. For the heart of the problem is not, as Wollstonecraft supposed, finding the proper form of expression for the feeling heart. Rather, the real problem lies in the very concept of the feeling heart itself. Basically, all that Maria's argument does is to foreground this feeling heart: she justifies her flight from Venables by an appeal to her own subjective judgment and urges the members of the jury to consult their own feelings in deciding her case. Moreover, Maria's defense, for all its insight, simply strives to institutionalize female feeling as a new rationale for the old covenant of marriage. Even as she pleads for freedom from Venables, Maria calls Darnford her "husband" and declares that what she really wants is only a new marriage in which better to fulfill "the duties of a wife and mother" (p. 148). We are not really surprised that Maria's attempt to generalize and institutionalize feeling has no effect on the court, for in her argument Wollstonecraft fails once more to take her own insights to their logical conclusions. Just as she turned from exploring the radical implications of Jemima's narrative, she now stops short of exposing the tyranny of the marriage contract itself. Instead, the defiant Mary Wollstonecraft clings to that bedrock of bourgeois society—the belief in individual feeling—and in doing this her voice hesitates and finally falters into silence.

Wollstonecraft does not develop the hybrid form that might have fused "purpose and structure" largely because she cannot relinquish the individualistic values tied up with sentimental structure itself. But Wollstonecraft's dilemma was not unique. Indeed, it is only one example of a philosophical as well as a social problem that beleaguered men as well as women in the late eighteenth century. For the fundamental desire that makes her retain individualistic values and that informs not only this work but all of her literary productions (and her turbulent life as well) is a longing to identify—or assert—a reliable relationship between phenomenal reality and the intimation of transcendent meaning that the imagination irrepressibly projects. In other words, Wollstonecraft's refusal to abandon the ideal of "true sensibility," even after she had recognized that the romantic expectations endemic to such sensibility were agents of the very institutions she was trying to criticize, reflects her persistent yearning for some connection between spiritual values and real, everyday experience. What might now seem to be an artificial and disconcertingly abstract vocabulary expresses—and attempts to satisfy—this longing. The themes and vocabulary of sentimentalism aspire to depict complete happiness in this world in terms that transcend the materiality, hence the mortality, of the flesh. While producing such imaginative gratification may very well be a continuing goal of imaginative literature, the

particular intensity of this longing at the end of the eighteenth century signals the inadequacies of empiricism and rationalism either to fill the imaginative vacuum left by Enlightenment challenges to orthodox religion or to quell the anxieties generated by political and social instability.

Perhaps the two most fundamental problems with sentimentalism's solution to this longing lay in its celebration of immaterial, romantic rewards and in its emphasis on individual feeling. For in a society in which one's value, indeed, one's very definition, depended on class position—or, more visibly, on the rewards of money and, beyond that, property and social prestige—the acquisition of romantic love was at best a private supplement to more public indices of power. And if romantic love was not a supplement to, but a substitute for, material rewards (as it would have been for most women), then its pursuit may well have absorbed energies that under different circumstances might have been channeled toward accomplishing more “real”—because more socially effective—goals. The other half of this problem is that the myth of personal autonomy perpetuated by sentimentalism tended to blind its adherents to the way in which an individual's opportunities and even the forms of “happiness” available are, in some important respects, delimited by one's position within culture. Perceptive, intelligent writers like Mary Wollstonecraft continued to envision social change and personal fulfillment primarily in terms of individual effort, and therefore they did not focus on the systemic constraints exercised by such legal and political institutions as marriage. In practical terms, sentimentalism was no more a lasting solution to the imaginative longings of powerless individuals than it was to the continuing political and social inequalities of the late eighteenth-century class system. But, in providing substitute goals and gratifications, it did help shore up the institutions of power and silence their would-be critics. In this sense, Maria's celebration of the “humanizing affection” of the individual actually constitutes Wollstonecraft's retreat from the insight to which she was so close in *The Rights of Woman*: the recognition that the individual's situation—his or her position within class, gender, economics, and history—really delimits freedom and virtually defines the “self.”

No doubt the problem of sentimentalism loomed large for any late eighteenth-century liberal (Rousseau is a case in point), but for women the dilemma was particularly acute. For women had a special investment in sentimentalism. Not only did the “humanizing affections” theoretically natural to women and central to sentimentalism give women an important function in a society increasingly marked by economic competition; sentimentalism was also virtually the only form in which middle-class women were allowed legitimate self-

expression. A woman's only "business," as Wollstonecraft recognized in *The Rights of Woman*, was the "business" of the heart; for her, sentiments constituted the only "events."²⁶ Yet because of women's particular place within their culture, this promise of sentimentalism proved to be delusive. As we have seen, and as Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out, the middle-class code of propriety simultaneously defined women exclusively in terms of their sexuality and demanded that their every public action deny that sexuality. Because women were so defined, they were actively encouraged to envision emotional and even spiritual fulfillment in sensual terms and yet, at the same time, because their sexuality had to be susceptible to the control of marriage, they were enjoined to sublimate, to desexualize their real sexuality in highly euphemistic expressions. Thus, middle-class ideology, and sentimental novels in particular, simultaneously tied women's aspirations to the fatal parabola of physical desire and denied them either a cultural myth of female sexual transcendence or complete appreciation of sexual self-expression. Indeed, given the restrictions placed on the expression of female sexuality in eighteenth-century society, women were encouraged to view their sexuality as a function of *male* initiative, a response to present and future relationships, not as self-expression at all.

The twist given female sexuality by bourgeois values is the heart of darkness Mary Wollstonecraft never identified. Yet it helps explain why sentimentalism was so appealing and so fatal to her as well as to many less-thoughtful women of this period. Mary Wollstonecraft could not renounce "true sensibility" because it was the only form in which her society allowed her to express either her sexuality or her craving for transcendent meaning. Yet retaining that form of expression, those values, and that self-definition prohibited her from disentangling her femaleness from male institutions or control. It also helps explain her self-contradictory presentation of sexuality in *Maria*. For in this novel Wollstonecraft insists—to a degree remarkable for any late eighteenth-century novelist—on the importance of female sexual expression, yet, despite her insistence that sexual fulfillment is not only necessary but possible, every sexual relationship she depicts is dehumanizing and revolting. Sexuality is virtually the only human quality that is described in this novel with any degree of physical detail, and the descriptions—like the one of Venables' "tainted breath, pimpled face, and blood-shot eyes"—suggest grotesqueness, violence, and contamination.

In the course of her adult life, Wollstonecraft was repeatedly crippled by this collusion between sexuality and sentimentality. Her early letters to Imlay reveal the unmistakable pleasure of a woman's first emotionally satisfying and physically stimulating relationship. Yet

even as she confesses to a "tenderness for [Imlay's] person," (*MWL*, p. 259; 19 August 1794), Wollstonecraft tries to "purify"—and prolong—their sexual alliance with what she conceded were "romantic" theories of the imagination (*MWL*, p. 263; 22 September 1794). And, in the end, Imlay's betrayal left Wollstonecraft retreating to these "romantic" theories in an attempt to salvage the ideal of "love" from the ruins of physical satiety.

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 by 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 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 of eaters and drinkers and *child-begeters*, certainly have no idea. You will smile at an observation that has just occurred to me:—I consider those minds as the most strong and original, whose imagination acts as the stimulus to their senses. [*MWL*, p. 291; 12 June 1795]

In this last sentence Wollstonecraft transfers the impetus of sexual attraction to the imagination in order to rob physical stimulation of its inevitably devastating primacy. Such a transfer comes close to "purifying" love of its physical component altogether—or, as Wollstonecraft formulated it both in Maria's relationship to Darnford and in her own letter to Imlay, "love" is defined precisely as the relationship in which a man has "sufficient delicacy of feeling to govern desire" (*MWL*, p. 273; 30 December 1794). Although Imlay's betrayal did not stifle either Wollstonecraft's emotional or sexual desires, her first sexual encounter with William Godwin shows her fears surfacing once more. Ironically, in the light of the profoundly ambiguous role Rousseau had played in her developing self-image, Wollstonecraft alludes to him here. "Consider what has passed as a fever of your imagination," she begs Godwin the morning after their tryst, "and I—will become again a *Solitary Walker*" (*MWL*, p. 337; 17 August 1796).

The problem that plagued Mary Wollstonecraft's final efforts to reconcile her intense female feeling with intellectual independence was simply an extreme version of what was, for women of this period, a general dilemma. Not only were late eighteenth-century moralists virtually unanimous in pointing out the twin appeal and danger of sentimental novels for women readers and writers,²⁷ but most of the

examples we have of this genre reveal many of the same problems as *Maria*. Perhaps, in fact, the only effective way a woman who thought as well as felt could successfully deal with the issue of feeling was to satirize “true sensibility,” as Jane Austen did in her juvenilia and in *Northanger Abbey*. The irony Austen was to perfect in her mature works can even be seen as a second and more sophisticated handling of female feeling, for the distance irony affords enables Austen to explore her characters’ “romantic expectations”—and delusions—without committing herself definitively to the same desires. Austen’s relationship to the values of her society remains protectively opaque; she is implicitly critical in isolated phrases at the same time that her narrative celebration of marriage seems to ratify the central institution of bourgeois culture.

IN 1871, ALMOST SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS after Mary Wollstonecraft’s death, a more successful woman writer paid tribute to the resilience of Wollstonecraft’s feelings. The words are those of Mary Ann Evans:

Hopelessness has been to me, all through my life, but especially in painful years of my youth, the chief source of wasted energy with all the consequent bitterness of regret. Remember, it has happened to many to be glad they did not commit suicide, though they once ran for the final leap, or as Mary Wollstonecraft did, wetted their garments well in the rain hoping to sink the better when they plunged. She tells how it occurred to her as she was walking in the damp shroud, that she might live to be glad that she had not put an end to herself—and so it turned out. She lived to know some real joys, and death came in time to hinder the joys from being spoiled.²⁸

It is significant that Mary Ann Evans/George Eliot generalizes Wollstonecraft’s determined death-walk (“wetted their garments well”), then individualizes her second thoughts (“it occurred to her”): from the multitude of hopeless, deathbound women, this one woman steps forth, capable of imagining “real joys” even in her “damp shroud.” Mary Wollstonecraft was nothing if she was not determined, and, even when it was unfashionable to be so determined or so outspoken, her example stood in for many a more retiring woman’s fantasies of self-assertion. Thus women novelists like Maria Edgeworth and Fanny Burney, for whose novels Wollstonecraft provided the requisite monitor figure, also used these Wollstonecraft-characters to voice what may have been their own staunchly denied desires. The words of the numerous Harriet Frekes (*Belinda*, 1801) and Elinor Joddrels (*The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties*, 1814) of early nineteenth-century novels have such resonance that one cannot help but wonder how their authors heard these voices in their own imaginations—whether there was not a secret thrill of kindred souls.

Yet it is also significant that Mary Ann Evans' tribute to Wollstonecraft fully acknowledges the fragility of her salvaged joy ("death came in time"). Within the legal institutions of late eighteenth-century society, and under the disapproving frown of the Proper Lady, the achievement of female autonomy was almost invariably short-lived. This is the lesson proved by numerous early nineteenth-century women writers but by none as well, perhaps, as by Wollstonecraft's physical as well as spiritual daughter. Wollstonecraft died eleven days after giving birth to a child who would grow up to bear a name fraught with literary and emotional significance: Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley. Yet for the future Mary Shelley, Wollstonecraft's determination, her anger, and her energy would always stand in silent judgment over her own growing fears. All too well, Mary Shelley was to learn that to defy propriety, as her mother did, required a self-confidence and self-consciousness dearly purchased in bourgeois society. Not many women could so doggedly, so insistently, celebrate "their own minds" as Mary Wollstonecraft did in this letter from her last summer:

Those who are bold enough to advance before the age they live in, and to throw off, by the force of their own minds, the prejudices which the maturing reason of the world will in time disavow, must learn to brave censure. We ought not to be too anxious respecting the opinion of others.— I am not fond of vindications.— Those who know me will suppose that I acted from principle.—Nay, as we in general give others credit for worth, in proportion as we possess it—I am easy with regard to the opinions of the *best* part of mankind.— I *rest* on my own. [MWL, p. 413; Summer 1797]

19. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 89.
20. See, for example, Boulton, *The Language of Politics*, pp. 174-75.
21. *The Rights of Woman*, p. 58. Subsequent references will appear in the text.
22. For a discussion of this aspect of *The Rights of Woman*, see Janet M. Todd, "The Language of Sex in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*," *Mary Wollstonecraft Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (April 1973): 10-17.
23. Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (New York: Dutton/Everyman, 1974), p. 324.
24. For a discussion of the role Milton plays in the writings of other nineteenth- and twentieth-century women, see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 187-212.
25. Nina Auerbach also discusses Wollstonecraft's anxiety about the "subtle sexual contagion" of women's schools. See her *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 14-15.
26. See Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Ev'ry Woman is at Heart a Rake," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1974): 38.

Chapter Three

1. See Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974), p. 131. While in France, Wollstonecraft also began to speak less critically about sexuality. To a Frenchwoman who claimed to lack sexual appetite, Wollstonecraft replied, "Tant pis pour vous, madame, c'est un défaut de la nature" (quoted by Tomalin, p. 132).
2. William Godwin, *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. William Clark Durant (London and New York: Constable, 1927), p. 84.
3. Amelia Alderson, quoted by Ralph M. Wardle, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Critical Biography* (Lawrence, Kans.: University of Kansas Press, 1951), p. 274.
4. *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), edited by Carol H. Poston (Lincoln, Neb., and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), p. 5. All subsequent references will be to this edition.
5. See *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (London: J. Johnson, 1790; facsimile edition, Gainesville, Fla.: Scholar's Facsimiles & Reprints, 1960), p. iv.
6. See Mitzi Myers, "Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written . . . in Sweden*: Toward Romantic Autobiography," in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, ed. Roseann Runte (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), pp. 169-70.
7. See *ibid.*, pp. 178-79; Carol H. Poston, "Introduction" to *Letters Written . . . in Sweden*, pp. xvi-xvii; and Florence Boos, "Review of Wollstonecraft's *Letters Written . . . in Sweden*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 10 (Winter 1976-77): 280-81.
8. Even though many liked the *Letters*, Wollstonecraft's contemporaries reacted strongly—and generally negatively—to the less orthodox theology this work contained. A reviewer for *The Monthly Magazine and American Review*, for instance, argued that we "may date her lapse from that dignity of character which before distinguished her" to this period, when she "discarded all faith in christianity. . . . From this period she adored [God] . . . not as one whose interposing power is ever silently at work on the grand theatre of human affairs, causing eventual good to spring from present evil, and permitting nothing but for wise and benevolent purposes; but merely as the first great cause and vital spring of existence" (*The Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 1 [1799]: 331).
9. Myers, "Mary Wollstonecraft's *Letters*," p. 170.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
12. The letters to Imlay are reprinted in *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft* (MWL), pp. 289–314. When the publication of these private letters made Wollstonecraft's illicit relationship with Imlay public, the positive reception some reviewers had given to the *Letters Written . . . in Sweden* gave way to general condemnation.
13. See MWL, p. 309; 9 August 1795.
14. See *ibid.*, pp. 310–12; 26 August–25 September 1795.
15. See *ibid.*, pp. 313–14; 27 September 1795.
16. Perhaps the most notable opinion Wollstonecraft preserved in defiance of Godwin's skepticism was her religious faith in “God, or something, consolatory [*sic*] in the air” (MWL, p. 394; 21 May 1797).
17. Godwin, *Memoirs*, p. 111.
18. Godwin states that Wollstonecraft believed the “purpose and structure of the . . . work . . . capable of producing an important effect” (Godwin's Preface to *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* [1798; New York: Norton, 1975], p. 5). Mitzi Myers also explores the difficulty Wollstonecraft had in reconciling purpose and structure; see her “Unfinished Business: Wollstonecraft's *Maria*,” *Wordsworth Circle* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 107–14.
19. *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798; New York: Norton, 1975), p. 8. All subsequent references will be to this edition.
20. In her essay, “The Difference of View” (in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus [New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979], pp. 10–21) Mary Jacobus points out many of these same hesitations and contradictions; but even though she recognizes *Maria's* stylistic collapse (“Marginalised, the language of feeling can only ally itself with insanity—an insanity which, displaced into writing, produces a moment of imaginative and linguistic excess over-brimming the container of fiction, and swamping the distinction between author and character” [p. 15]), she interprets this collapse as a radical critique of masculine literary conventions. Indeed, Jacobus sees in Wollstonecraft's elision of narrator and character a Utopian gesture, a genuinely revolutionary moment pointing toward (if not fully achieving) a new kind of feminist writing. “A mental convulsion breaches the impasse between undifferentiated disappearance into a ‘male’ text and the prison of sensibility. Rejecting the essentialism that keeps women subjected as well as subjective, it also rejects mastery and dominance. Madness imagined as revolution, or the articulation of Utopian desire (‘a demand for something—they scarcely knew what’), represent gestures past the impasse played out in Mary Wollstonecraft's prose. In writing, such gestures may release possibilities repressed by a dominant ideology or its discourse. The transgression of literary boundaries—moments when structures are shaken, when language refuses to lie down meekly, or the marginal is brought into sudden focus, or intelligibility itself refused—reveal not only the conditions of possibility within which women's writing exists, but what it would be like to revolutionise them. In the same way, the moment of desire (the moment when the writer most clearly installs herself in her writing) becomes a refusal of mastery, an opting for openness and possibility, which can in itself make women's writing a challenge to the literary structures it must necessarily inhabit” (p. 16). Jacobus is not claiming that Wollstonecraft was fully aware of such possibilities, but her analysis still seems to me to superimpose twentieth-century feminist aesthetics onto Wollstonecraft's work. Judged by the aesthetic standards Wollstonecraft would have recognized, the narrative collapse of *Maria* signals failure, not the birth of a new form. I think we can see this, in part, in Wollstonecraft's repeated attempts to revise the manuscript and in her tendency to fall back on catchphrases and stock incidents from sentimental novels every time she sought an alternative to the emotional claustrophobia she identified in patriarchal

institutions. I find it more convincing to interpret her depiction of Jemima as an intimation of a revolutionary alternative. The fact that Wollstonecraft invokes sentimentalism to dismiss this character reinforces my argument that she saw sentimentalism as part of the solution, not part of the problem.

This disagreement notwithstanding, Jacobus' argument bears some interesting similarities to the one I present here.

21. Eighteenth-century moralists frequently connected sentimentalism, imaginative "animation," and sexual agitation. In her *Rights of Woman*, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft herself connected indulged sensibility and "vice": "women subjected by ignorance to their sensations," she declared, "and only taught to look for happiness in love, refine on sensual feelings, and adopt metaphysical notions respecting that passion, which lead them shamefully to neglect the duties of life, and frequently in the midst of these sublime refinements they plump into actual vice" (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 183). Hannah More was even more vehement about the danger of sensibility. "Perhaps," she warned her readers in 1799, "if we were to inquire into the remote cause of some of the blackest crimes which stain the annals of mankind, profligacy, murder, and especially suicide, we might trace them back to their original principle, an ungoverned Sensibility" (Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 2d ed., 2 vols. [London: T. Cadell, Jun. & W. Davies, 1799], 2:102-3).

22. Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 15.

23. Rousseau discusses this paradox in his *Lettre à d'Alembert*, vol. 4 of *Correspondance générale de J.-J. Rousseau*, ed. Théophile Dufour, 21 vols. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1924).

24. In his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), Raymond Williams explains that the word *sensibility* was, throughout the eighteenth century, informed by its root affiliation with *sensible* and that it was closely associated with both *sentimental* and *sentiments*. "The significant development in 'sense' was the extension from a process to a particular kind of product: 'sense' as good sense, good judgment, from which the predominant modern meaning of *sensible* was to be derived. . . . *Sensibility* in its C18 uses ranged from a use much like that of modern 'awareness' (not only 'consciousness' but 'conscience') to a strong form of what the word appears literally to mean, the ability to feel. . . . The association of *sentimental* with *sensibility* was then close: a conscious openness to feelings, and also a conscious consumption of feelings" (*Keywords*, pp. 235-38). For a discussion of the physiological basis for sentimentalism see George S. Rousseau, "Nerves, Spirits, and Fibres: Towards Defining the Origins of Sensibility," in *Studies in the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 3, ed. R. F. Brissenden and J. C. Eade (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1976), pp. 137-57.

25. To see Wollstonecraft's ambivalence about the imagination, compare these two statements of hers: (1) "One great cause of misery in the present imperfect state of society is, that the imagination, continually tantalized, becomes the inflated wen of the mind, draining off nourishment from the vital parts" (from *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect It has Produced in Europe*, quoted in *A Wollstonecraft Anthology*, ed. Janet M. Todd [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977], p. 126); (2) the imagination "is the mother of sentiment, the great distinction of our nature, the only purifier of the passions. . . . The imagination is the true fire, stolen from heaven, to animate this cold creature of clay, producing all those fine sympathies that lead to rapture, rendering men social by extending their hearts" (*MWL*, p. 263; 22 September 1794).

26. "The mighty business of female life is to please, and restrained from entering into more important concerns by political and civil oppression, sentiments become events" (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, p. 183).

27. The appeal of sentimental novels is graphically conveyed by Hannah More: "Such is the frightful facility of this species of composition, that every raw girl, while she reads, is tempted to fancy that she can also write. . . . And as Corregio [*sic*], on first beholding a picture which exhibited the perfection of the Graphic art, prophetically felt all his own future greatness, and cried out in rapture, 'And I too am a painter!' so a thorough paced novel-reading Miss, at the close of every tissue of hackney'd adventures, feels within herself the stirring impulse of corresponding genius, and triumphantly exclaims, 'And I too am an author!' The gluttoned imagination soon overflows with the redundance of cheap sentiment and plentiful incident, and by a sort of arithemetical proportion, is enabled by the perusal of any three novels, to produce a fourth; till every fresh production, like the progeny of Banquo, is followed by Another, and another, and another!" (*Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 1:184-85).

More is equally eloquent on the danger of sentimental novels. Such works, she argues, "teach, that chastity is only individual attachment; that no duty exists which is not prompted by feeling; that impulse is the main spring of virtuous actions, while laws and religion are only unjust restraints" (*ibid.*, p. 35).

28. Mary Ann Evans [George Eliot], "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft," in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 199-200.

Chapter Four

1. *Mary Shelley's Journal*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947), pp. 204-6. Subsequent references will be to this volume.

2. Claire Clairmont, quoted by Mrs. Julian Marshall in *The Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, 2 vols. (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1889), 2:248.

3. We have already seen this at work in *Maria*. One passage from her novel *Mary* will suffice to demonstrate Wollstonecraft's persistent desire to analyze the place her own distress occupies in the prevalent ideological configuration. This novel is sometimes hyperbolically sentimental, and Wollstonecraft ends by endorsing Mary's sentiment (partly, no doubt, because it specifically recapitulates her own love and grief for Fanny Blood). Yet passages like the following urge us to exercise the kind of judgment that she cannot yet consistently apply to herself. The narrator describes novels as "those most delightful substitutes for bodily dissipation" and then continues: "If my readers would excuse the sportiveness of fancy, and give me credit for genius, I would go on and tell them such tales as would force the sweet tears of sensibility to flow in copious showers down beautiful cheeks, to the discomposure of rouge, &c. &c. Nay, I would make it so interesting, that the fair peruser should beg the hair-dresser to settle the curls himself, and not interrupt her" (*Mary, a Fiction*, ed. Gary Kelly [1798; London: Oxford University Press, 1976], pp. 2, 3).

4. Discussing a woman whose husband is more well known than she is presents a problem when it comes to names. In Mary Shelley's case, this difficulty is compounded by the fact that she referred to her husband as "Shelley" and by the fact that she was still Mary Godwin during the early part of their relationship. I refer to Mary Shelley as "Shelley"—even when discussing events before her marriage—except when clarity demands that I designate her simply as "Mary." The five children in the household she grew up in included, in addition to herself, Charles and Mary Jane (who is also called Jane and Claire) Clairmont, children of Mary's stepmother either out of wedlock or by a former marriage; Fanny Imlay, daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and Gilbert Imlay; and William Godwin, son of Mary's stepmother and William Godwin.